

CELTIC CHRISTIANITY AND THE FUTURE OF RELIGIOUS PRODUCTION

By

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In this thesis I analyze the debates and issues surrounding the modern Celtic Christianity movement largely through an examination of relevant popular and scholarly literature. Celtic Christianity is a modern Christian spirituality movement allegedly based in the beliefs and practices of pre-Christian and early Christian Celtic peoples, generally in present-day Ireland, Scotland and Wales. As a Christian tradition, several popular writers offer works on Celtic Christian theology, which generally emphasize the basic goodness of God's Creation and the need to protect that Creation from harm.

Some critics, though, challenge the historical and theological claims made by Celtic Christians. These critics point to inaccuracies in popular Celtic Christian historical accounts and the borrowing of Celtic religious and cultural themes by non-Celtic peoples in their arguments against the modern movement. They sometimes conclude that Celtic Christianity is part of a larger trend of secularized, individualistic religious production that ultimately harms the cultures from which it borrows.

Rather than accepting as true the claims of believers and critics, my point in this thesis is to examine the contesting claims of authority and accuracy from a religious studies perspective. Through this perspective, I understand religious appropriation and invention as part of the general processes of religious creation and evolution. As a creation-centered, or nature-centered, tradition, Celtic Christianity represents a modern attempt to address ecological and social crises from a Christian religious framework. Celtic Christianity, then, may be seen as a modern example of nature-based spirituality. Adopting a religious studies perspective in this thesis helps to situate Celtic Christianity beyond its historical inaccuracies and within a broader milieu of nature-based religious production. Much more research is needed to discover in what ways Celtic Christians engage in activities to alleviate ecological and social crises. Such research could provide valuable information not only about Celtic Christianity but about the interactions of religion and nature in the modern world as well.

## CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION

Celtic Christianity is a modern form of Christian spirituality based in traditional belief structures and practices of the Celtic cultures of Britain and Ireland. Celtic spirituality, as defined by the British religious studies scholar Marion Bowman, includes Celtic Christianity, Celtic Paganism, Druidry, and Celt-influenced New Age beliefs (Bowman 2002, 56). While noting interrelations between other non-Christian forms, in this thesis I primarily examine Celtic Christianity and analyze the debates concerning its historical development and spiritual authenticity. I adopt here a religious studies perspective in which the task is to “properly analyze religion rather than to defend or engage in it” (Taylor 2005, 1374), and utilize David Chidester’s “availability of symbols” mode of engagement with religious appropriation to analyze the dynamics of conflict and exchange between critics and supporters of Celtic Christianity (Chidester 1988, 158). Such an approach allows me to situate Celtic Christianity within more general trends of religious development. Because modern Celtic Christianity, through its popular literary expressions, values nature and encourages engagement with the social and ecological crises of the world, it may be seen as representative of a new type of nature-based religion. Hopefully, this perspective regarding the modern Celtic Christianity movement will aid future studies of the interactions between religions and nature.

Popular authors on Celtic Christianity claim that when Christianity first arrived in Britain and Ireland, the native Celts incorporated some of their own pre-Christian beliefs, such as those regarding the immanence of deities in the natural world and the importance

of the number three (which provided a natural affinity for Christian Trinitarianism), into their regional Christian beliefs and practices. These beliefs continue, they claim, in the particular Celtic worldview of some of the modern inhabitants of Ireland, Scotland, Wales and England and help create a generally orthodox though nonetheless unique form of Christian spiritual orientation. Today, Celtic Christianity is represented by several popular books and intentional ecumenical communities, such as the Iona Community and the Community of Aidan and Hilda. Some historians and theologians, however, challenge certain historical and theological claims of modern Celtic Christians and criticize many popular writers for their readiness to misrepresent the people of Celtic lands.

As part of this analysis I will examine two important and interrelated areas of Celtic Christian scholarship—the differing historical accounts and their related evidence and the theologies and practices of modern writers and practitioners—in order to understand the place of this emerging tradition among other spiritual orientations. Many of claims made by Celtic Christians find little or no support in historical evidence. Some critics of Celtic Christianity, though, rather than offering neutral analysis of the tradition’s anemic historical grounding, become partisans in debates of authenticity by subtly claiming authority to speak for a tradition, then seeking to preserve it from what they consider damaging, syncretistic influences.

Scholarly literature on new religious movements offers, in contrast, a different approach to claims or critiques of historical continuity. Many new religions inaccurately appropriate historical evidence, or invent for themselves a “history” altogether, in support of their theological claims. But this is a common feature of most religions, especially



noticeable in those seeking legitimacy within the dominant culture. These claims relating to the ownership of the “true” tradition and the legitimacy of belief deserve further analysis within religious studies (Chidester 1988, 157). Modern pagans, for example, often face similar criticisms of invention and historical inaccuracy. Because of their shared relationships as alternative religious movements and because they sometimes draw upon the same Celtic mythology, scholarly literature concerning modern paganism offers valuable resources for understanding Celtic Christianity and helps to situate it among other religious developments as well. The study of Celtic Christianity through religious studies lenses, including primarily the perspectives of new religious movement theory, and understanding it as a form of contemporary nature religion, provides an illuminating vantage point for observing contemporary religious production in an ecological age.

While situating Celtic Christianity within the study of new religious movements, this paper also examines its potential ecological and social benefits. A central tenet of Celtic Christianity, for example, involves a deep concern for life, justice and ecological wellbeing. Modern Celtic Christianity represents an attempt to construct a form of Christianity capable of engaging with the social and ecological crises of the world today. Much of Celtic Christianity's historical support is certainly invented or based on questionable historical and archaeological data, but the historical element provides only part of the Celtic Christian story. Religious studies scholars should not so quickly reject Celtic Christianity solely for its historical inaccuracies and inventions but understand it as part of an ordinary process of religious change as well as a meaningful and very human attempt to engage with and address real problems in the world.

It is not the purpose of this thesis to demonstrate that environmental degradation is serious, threatens many species, and causes great suffering; this is, rather a starting point for it. Moreover, as human populations grow and the distance between rich and poor lengthens, human-induced ecological crises and social problems, such as war and poverty, will likely intensify further. As long as these issues remain important to people, mainstream religions and new religions must engage these ecological and social problems if they are to remain meaningful to their believers. Celtic Christianity provides one means of positive religious engagement in the world. By examining the Celtic Christian call to engagement with social and ecological problems, I hope to provide a more thorough account of modern Celtic Christian beliefs and practices than would be available from historical evidence alone and to perhaps add valuable information for further scholarly analyses of the relationships between religion and nature.

Chapter 2 of this thesis examines the historical component of Celtic Christian belief and the important debates and interpretations of historical evidence regarding Christianity in Celtic lands. Historical claims regarding the continuation of pagan practices and beliefs into the Christianity of Celtic lands remain crucial to Celtic Christian belief. Issues of historical inaccuracies also provide central points in the arguments of Celtic Christianity's skeptical critics. Using archaeological, literary and linguistic evidence, this chapter explores the Celtic cultures of Britain and Ireland from their emergence through the introduction of Christianity and into the Romantic Celtic revivals of eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Historical evidence shows that many features of the modern Celtic Christianity movement derive, like many modern forms of European-based paganism, from the Romantic period of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Popular accounts of

pre-Christian cultural stability in the rural areas of Britain and Ireland and the application of a modern term, “Celt,” to peoples who did not identify themselves as such reflect this romantic rural ideal. While certain crucial aspects of the popular stories regarding early Celtic Christian belief may be highly innovative, they nonetheless create an important counter-narrative to dominant historical stories and help distinguish modern Celtic Christianity as a unique spiritual orientation.

Chapter 3 turns to an analysis of Celtic Christian theology and practice as expressed through several popular writers. Related to the popular historical accounts, Celtic Christians often cite the teachings of Pelagius and John Scotus Eriugena and the lives of early Celtic saints such as Patrick, Columba and Brigit as the foundation of Celtic Christian theology. The repression of these teachings by the medieval Church represents, for many believers, one stage in the long history of oppression of Celtic peoples. Celtic Christianity is often presented as an alternative to this oppressive Church history in its respect for the roles of women and the value placed on ecological stability. For Celtic Christians, God is not a distant being, barely involved in the fallen material world. Instead, God, through the members of the Trinity and the saints, remains highly active in a basically good world, covered only by the works of sin. Though they claim historical continuities with pre-Christian beliefs, many modern Celtic Christians, or at least most popular writers on the subject, nonetheless emphasize the orthodoxy of their tradition. For Celtic Christians, this theology presents an important alternative to the cold, distant theology of the Church (or the theology responsible for the damages analyzed by Lynn White, Jr. [2003]) but does not involve a break with what they conceive to be essential aspects of Christian belief. Popular writing on Celtic Christianity also often includes a

call for environmental and social engagement. Chapter 3 therefore examines Celtic Christian activism at events such as the Faslane protest and through organized communities such as Iona. The call to social and ecological activism and the practice of such beliefs remains crucial to truly understanding the modern movement.

Chapter 4 situates Celtic Christianity within religious studies theory, particularly theories of new religious movements and nature religion. This chapter compares the experiences of Celtic Christians with those of modern European-based pagan groups, many of which also originate in the eighteenth and nineteenth century Romantic revivals. This will facilitate a better understanding of the place of Celtic Christianity, and its mutually influential relationships with various other religious thinkers, groups, and movements, within what Colin Campbell called the “cultic milieu” (Campbell 2002). Examining Celtic Christianity from a religious studies perspective, particularly using the work of David Chidester, Bron Taylor, and Marion Bowman, helps reveal the contesting claims of authenticity made by numerous interested parties and to understand Celtic Christianity as part of much larger processes of religious evolution. As a spiritual orientation directly engaged with the created world, Celtic Christianity also contains elements of what Catherine Albanese calls nature religion. In other words, Celtic Christians, in some ways, incorporate certain religious orientations toward the natural world within their belief systems. Beyond its elements of nature religion, Celtic Christianity consciously attempts to recognize and offer solutions for, in a religious way, the social and ecological crises facing the world.

When we examine Celtic Christianity through these lenses, beyond just historical and theological critiques, we gain important information about current religious

responses to ecological and social crises in the world. If ecological and social crises persist through the future, as evidence shows they may, then ecologically-oriented religious traditions such as Celtic Christianity might continue to emerge as well. It is important for scholars of religion to note that individuals are attempting to resurrect and construct more ecologically-friendly and socially beneficial religious traditions, and hopefully, this thesis adds something to this growing area of interest.

## CHAPTER 2 HISTORY OF CELTIC CHRISTIANITY: POPULAR AND CRITICAL ACCOUNTS

Accounts of the historical development of Celtic Christianity remain crucial to the modern movement, as John Ó Ríordáin says, “to understand Christian Celtic spirituality to any degree, it is helpful to have some appreciation of the religious and cultural attitudes and imagery that informed the minds and hearts of the pre-Christian ancestors” (Ó Ríordáin 1996, 36-37). Popular claims, however, are not always supported by archaeological, literary and linguistic data, leading some scholars to doubt the viability of modern Celtic Christian belief. In other words, for some, historical inaccuracies and appropriations of sacred symbols are problems for Celtic Christianity that should be fixed by believers in some way if the tradition is not to be abandoned as useless altogether. This chapter examines the histories of Britain and Ireland from Celtic times through the introduction of Christianity and into the Romantic Celtic revivals of the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries and evaluates the different historical arguments made by believers and critics. Although Celtic Christians can find some support for their historical accounts, the modern movement emerges largely out of the romanticism of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries as well as the Romantic “Celtic Twilight” at the turn of the twentieth century. Embedded in these differing critical and popular historical accounts, however, are often issues of religious and historical authority, or issues regarding who has the “right” to define the tradition and its history. Examining more deeply the claims and arguments made by Celtic Christianity’s believers and critics will help bring forward these issues of authority.

In regular usage, the term “Celt” encompasses several similar but nonetheless distinct cultures with different languages. Much of the present scholarly knowledge concerning the origins and history of the Celts derives from linguistic studies. Indeed, Celtic Studies today remains a primarily linguistic affair. Donald Meek, a Celtic Studies scholar and vocal critic of the modern Celtic Christian movement, says of the vagueness surrounding the identification of historical Celts, “the linguistic anchor is undoubtedly the most secure mooring which can be provided for the term” (Meek 2000, 8). The Celtic languages exist as a branch of Indo-European languages. While there certainly may have been many more Celtic languages, most linguistic evidence comes from the western-most groups in Brittany, Britain and Ireland. These Insular Celtic languages divide into two branches, namely, P-Celtic (including Welsh, Breton and the extinct Cornish and Cumbrian languages) and Q-Celtic (including Irish Gaelic, Scottish Gaelic and the extinct Manx) (Chapman 1992, 16). These languages remain definitive of Celtic peoples, though some scholars such as Malcolm Chapman have recently begun to doubt the existence of the Celts as a distinct people. Donald Meek says of the more loose modern usage, “nowadays, while the term 'Celtic' is still used by scholars in its linguistic and cultural sense, it is widely employed as a form of shorthand to denote more or less anything which is believed to be associated with the non-English aspects of the cultures of Scotland, Ireland, Man, Cornwall and Brittany” (Meek 2000, 8-9). For Meek and Chapman, current popular understandings of the term “Celt” derive from romantic or simplistic constructions of an idealized past by modern persons. Though it is important to note these issues of power and the presence of romantic ideals involved in modern popular accounts of the Celts, the term itself serves as a working descriptor of very real

and distinguishable historical peoples and serves as a symbol for modern believers in Celtic spiritualities (McIntosh 2001).

Several problems exist regarding the study of pre-Christian Britain and Ireland. As non-literate peoples, the Celts recorded none of their own stories. Rich material evidence remains, however, including ornate metalwork, indicating certain religious beliefs and practices. Beyond this, many of the earliest recorded versions of Celtic stories come from Christian monks, primarily in Ireland, and Roman military invaders like Julius Caesar. The works of Greek and Roman travelers often painted the Celts negatively, as a warlike and brutal people. The Christian monks, from whom we receive much of our knowledge of Celtic mythology, recorded stories that frequently reflected Christian events, such as in the *Irish Book of Invasions*, written in early medieval Ireland, which claimed that the first inhabitants of Ireland descended from Noah. Writers influenced by the popular romanticism and primitivism of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries also greatly influenced modern understandings of the Celts. These writers connected the Celts to sites like Stonehenge and Glastonbury, connections now known to be false, and gave them particularly Christian concerns, such as the anticipation of a future savior-figure. Many of these imagined historical details continue into modern popular accounts of Celtic spirituality and Celtic Christianity, and it is these details to which scholarly critics of Celtic Christianity often react. Much of the literary and oral history regarding and composed by the Celts originated in Wales, Scotland, and especially Ireland. This is because the land now known as England witnessed numerous invasions after the Celts, including by the Romans, Saxons, Vikings and Normans, each of which pushed the Celts



further to the “fringes,” into the hills of Wales and Scotland, or across the Irish Sea to Ireland (Hubert 1934b, 165-184).

### **Pre-Celtic Britain and Ireland**

The history of the inhabitation of Britain and Ireland, however, does not begin with the Celts. Humans have lived in the present-day British Isles, or at least those parts not covered by glaciers during ice ages, since the Paleolithic age. The oldest burial, in southern England, dates from about the year 25,000 BCE (Hutton 1991, 2). The emergence of agriculture around 5,000 BCE marked the shift to the Neolithic age. This period, from c. 5,000 to c. 3,200 BCE, also witnessed the emergence of stone construction in the north and large tombs, or barrows, around the region (although some individual tombs such as Carrowmore 4 in Ireland possibly date earlier in the Middle Stone Age) (Hutton 1991, 20). Barrows and other large construction features became more unique in differing regions. The presence of male and female figurines in these tombs as well as evidence for ritualized burials reveals a strong social structure and perhaps religious orientations.

The nature of this Neolithic religion remains hotly contested. Whether these Neolithic inhabitants of Britain and Ireland worshiped a mother Earth goddess, male warrior deities, or numerous local spirits remains unclear. Differing claims, though, remain very important for modern believers and critics of paganism and goddess spiritualities. These historical debates also remain important in the arguments surrounding Celtic Christianity. Modern historical accounts are always nested in political and religious controversies, with all sides often attempting to prove more than the evidence actually reveals. Adrian Ivakhiv notes, “the past is and has always been contested territory, and the more distant the past, the wilder and more varying the claims

about it” (Ivakhiv 2001, 31). The evidence of Neolithic religion remains unclear, and as Ronald Hutton notes, studies of modern hunter-gatherers have “demonstrated that such peoples can believe in a large number of spirits inhabiting the natural world, in a varying number of goddesses and gods, in a universal deity, or in differing combinations of all three. So it may have been with the New Stone Age peoples” (Hutton 1991, 44). The religious beliefs of these people may forever remain a mystery. What remains most significant for this study is how the different interpretations influence, support and are contested with regard to the various claims involved in modern religious constructions, including in the case of Celtic Christianity.

In the fourth century BCE, significant changes in lifestyle occurred around Britain and Ireland. People at this time took up agriculture, domesticated animals and lived in permanent or semi-permanent dwellings (Ó hÓgáin 1999, 6). Along the Boyne River in eastern Ireland emerged the massive grave complexes of Knowth and Newgrange after 3,200 BCE. These complexes contained tombs much larger and with more chambers than had previously existed. They also included, for the first time, many petroglyphs and decorative motifs involving spirals and circular forms. This period also witnessed the emergence of large rings created by the erection of monoliths in circular patterns. The Avebury complex, for example, included large earthen mounds, large stone rings, burial sites and evidence of wooden construction. Interestingly, the emergence of the ring complexes corresponded with the general abandonment of the older-style tombs. Some of the old tombs were even sealed. While this shift happened at different times and at different rates across the regions, it perhaps marked a period of significant social or even religious change. Scholars in the past have suggested that these changes represented the

effects of an invasion. The archaeological evidence, however, vague as it is, might only prove an internal shift in political and social organization due in part to the change to sedentary lifestyles (Hutton 1991, 52-87).

Around 3,000 BCE, persons erected ceremonial wooden structures on Salisbury Plain in Wessex. Later, around 2,100 BCE, local inhabitants abandoned other ritual centers, including stone circles and tomb sites, and raised several stone monoliths around the area of the wooden structures. By around 1,500 BCE, major construction was essentially complete on what is now called Stonehenge. Precisely because it has inspired the imaginations of people for centuries, many of Stonehenge's secrets may never be known. Ronald Hutton says, “to prehistorians it is probably the most tragic monument in the entire world, for its very fame has ensured the destruction of the evidence which might have permitted us to know its story” (Hutton 1991, 97). Archaeologists generally know that Stonehenge originally included burial sites and related wooden structures. Contrary to many popular and Romantic views, it was constructed relatively quickly, as evidenced by the instability of many of its monoliths, and of relatively poor stone, or at least the stone not taken from other monuments (Hutton 1991, 99). For Hutton, Stonehenge likely represented a major condensation of power in Wessex. The ceremonial practices of Stonehenge reflected certain social stratifications, as he said, “Stonehenge itself appears to be a very elitist monument, for the space at its heart is about half the size of a modern tennis court and the great stones would have blocked off the view from outside” (Hutton 1991, 99). Importantly, Stonehenge was not built by Celtic peoples. The last evidence of new construction and burial activity predates the arrival of the Celts in Britain by nearly a millennium. Popular legends originating among

Romantic writers in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, though, persist today and influence modern pagan and Celtic Christian ideas and practices.<sup>1</sup>

### The Celts

Archaeological evidence shows that sedentary lifestyles helped increase populations across Britain and Ireland. These increases in population, among other things, led to increases in resource depletion. Temperatures dropped after 1,000 BCE, bringing more rain and exacerbating erosion in recently cleared areas. River valleys across Britain filled with silt, creating and enlarging the broad moors observable today. Areas inhabited for at least a thousand years, such as southwest Ireland, became unoccupied by the year 500 BCE (Hutton 1991, 134-135). Into this changing region, probably quite slowly, arrived the Celts.

Traditionally, historians place the first arrivals of Celtic peoples to Britain in the fifth century BCE and to Ireland by the third century BCE (MacCana 1983, 7). According to popular Irish mythology, recorded in the early medieval *Book of Invasions* (*Leabhar Gabhála*), the Milesians from Spain, led by Donn and the poet Amairgen, defeated the previous inhabitants of the island (the *Tuatha Dé Danann* or People of the Goddess Dana) and established the first Celtic kingdom of Ireland (Low 1996, 25-26). Scholars such as Ronal Hutton, on the other hand, argue that the people we now identify as Celts arrived slowly to Britain and Ireland, not through definite periods of military conquest (Hutton 1991, 139). From where, though, did these Celts come?

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<sup>1</sup> For many modern pagan groups, Stonehenge is an important ritual site. Government regulations on public access to Stonehenge have generated certain conflicts among groups, though. For example, in 1995, English Heritage authorities arrested Arthur Uther Pendragon for entering the site without a permit on Midsummer Day. Pendragon, a leader of the Glastonbury Order of Druids, considers himself to be the reincarnation of King Arthur. Harvey (2005b) provides a succinct history of modern religious uses of Stonehenge. Green 1997 and Ivakhiv 2001 analyze modern pagan constructions of sites such as Stonehenge and Glasonbury.

Archaeological, linguistic and literary evidence places the emergence of the Celts in central Europe in the second millennium BCE. Archaeologists define three main stages in the development of Celtic culture. The first stage encompasses early cremation sites and remains somewhat vaguely defined and understood. The second, called “Hallstatt” based on significant finds of iron artifacts near an Austrian village in the 1870's, represents localized cultural development from around 800 BCE to approximately 600 or 500 BCE. The third stage, called “La Tène” after an area of Switzerland, represents the most artistically advanced form of Celtic culture. The Celtic peoples spread from central Europe and occupied much of present-day Europe by the third century BCE. It was these people, mostly La Tène style cultures, that the Romans encountered in their military conquests of Europe and that the first Christian missionaries found in Britain and Ireland (Chapman 1992, 6-7; Hubert 1934a).

Though scholars disagree upon the dates of the arrival of the Celts in Britain, important evidence exists regarding their presence on the Continent. Greek historians such as Herodotus spoke of Celtic peoples as early as the fifth and sixth centuries BCE. Timaeus (in the third century BCE) and Posidonius (in the first century BCE) also spoke of *keltoi* and *galatoi* (Celts and Gauls) (Green 1997, 14). Romans such as Strabo, Diodorus Siculus and Julius Caesar, in their military outings through Europe, described the Celts as well. Roman incursions into Gaul began in the 1<sup>st</sup> century BCE and continued through their 43 CE arrival in Britain (Hutton 1991, 200). Julius Caesar wrote of the religion of the Celts of Gaul, particularly involving the druids, or the priestly and intellectual class of Celts. In his works, Caesar drew upon his own experiences and the accounts of others to describe the Celtic pantheon and the practices of the druids. Much

of the present popular knowledge regarding Celtic religion and the druids continues with Caesar's assumptions.

Caesar described the Celts as a warlike people who practiced human sacrifice and followed a religion led by the druids who revered the oak tree and mistletoe (Green 1997, 46). He compared the pantheons of the tribes he encountered with his own Roman deities, assuming that all Celts accepted this local Gaulish pantheon and that each individual deity performed a specialized function, like the Roman deities (MacCana 1983, 20). The details of Caesar's account of the Celts of Gaul were generally accepted as true through most of the modern period of Celtic scholarship. Modern Celtic studies scholars remain skeptical of Caesar's account, though, largely for its imperialist perspective and perhaps inaccurate connections to Roman beliefs. Popular literature on Celtic Christianity and spirituality, however, remains largely indebted to the accounts of the Romans in Celtic lands. Therefore, it is important to address the central tenets of Celtic religion as constructed through the accounts of Caesar and other travelers through Celtic lands.

Irish Celtic society, for example, was divided into systems of clans, much like the modern Scottish system. A chieftain led each clan and held a certain territory with a seat of power located near a sacred tree or hill. The gods of these Irish societies associated themselves with specific clans and regions. Deities included the Daghdah (meaning "good god," a kind of leader of the pantheon), Goibhniu (a smith associated with the underworld), Lugh (a craft god associated with light), Macha (goddess of war), and Anu (an earth-mother goddess) (MacCana 1983, 32; Ó Ríordáin 1996, 28). Perhaps the most important Celtic goddess to Celtic Christians, though, is Brighid (also spelled Brigit), a

goddess of teaching, healing and prophecy (MacCana 1983, 33-34). Some argue that the attributes of this goddess were later applied to the Christian St. Brigid. Edward Sellner, a popular writer on Celtic Christian saints, says, “it is clear that St. Brigit stands on the boundary between pagan mythology and Christian spirituality” (Sellner 1993, 69). The resemblance of these Celtic deities to Greek and Roman gods, though, is readily apparent.<sup>2</sup> Caesar definitely explained Celtic deities in his own Roman terms, and the early Christian recorders of Celtic mythology may have been influenced by this Roman and Greek literature and may have projected that influence onto the Irish and other Celtic cultures.

In some instances, Celtic gods and goddesses existed with three personalities, or three aspects. For example, the goddess Brighid, in some accounts, is one of three sisters, all named Brighid and each with her own particular skill. The war goddesses Morrigan, Badb and Macha also frequently appear as a trinity (MacCana 1983, 86). These religious groupings of three are somewhat confirmed by sculpted figures with three faces found in France, Britain and Ireland. This also leads many Celtic Christians to assume that the Celts had a natural affinity for Catholic Trinitarianism (see Chapter 2). Though based in some material evidence, this idea of Celtic Trinitarianism owes much to modern imaginative literature as well. Robert Graves first promoted the image of the triune goddess as maiden, mother and crone in his work *The White Goddess* (1948). This idea has since been adopted by many pagan groups, particularly those associated with Wicca. Ronald Hutton notes that literature reveals no fewer than twenty goddesses with names similar to “Brighid,” meaning that each “aspect” of the goddess more probably refers to a

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<sup>2</sup> For example, Daghdah = Zeus, Goibhniu = Hephaestus, Lugh = Apollo, and Macha = Athena.

regional deity (Hutton 1991, 153). Based on other archaeological evidence, however, the number three probably held a special place in Celtic society and religion long before the arrival of Christianity (Hutton 1991, 214).

Graves is also largely responsible for promoting images of loving Celtic mother goddesses. Citing the example of Morrigan in Irish epic poetry, who sweeps onto the battle field and devours the dead like a raven and whose appearance to a living man means his impending death in battle, Hutton doubts the presence of any nurturing mother goddesses in Celtic culture. He says, “goddesses rarely feature in the Irish literatures as maternal or nurturing, being more often aggressive and voracious in both their sexuality and their bloodlust. Whether they represented role models for self-assertive Celtic women, or the fantasies of pagan Celtic male warriors, or the nightmares of the Christian monks who wrote the stories, is an open question” (Hutton 1991, 152). Indeed, they could have represented all three of Hutton’s options.

Along with the Roman and Greek accounts, some information regarding Celtic mythology comes from Christian sources as well, primarily monks working in the early medieval period in Ireland and Wales. These myths are expressed in lengthy poems, recorded by medieval monks but presumably recounted orally since pre-Christian times. In Ireland, these are divided in the Ulster Cycle, the Fionn Cycle and the Mythological Cycle. The Ulster Cycle consists of tales involving the kingdom of Ulster (located in Northern Ireland) and its famous warrior hero Cú Chulainn. The *Táin Bó Cuailnge* (“The Cattle Raid of Cuailnge”) involves the exploits of the hero Cú Chulainn and Queen Medb of Ulster, a possibly historical figure from the first century of the Common Era (see introduction to Kinsella 1969). The Fionn Cycle involves tales concerning the



adventures of the *fianna*, or roving bands of warriors, primarily the group led by Fionn mac Cumhaill. Finally, the Mythological Cycle includes various other local stories which do not fit within one of the other cycles such as those involving the *Tuatha Dé Danann*, who moved to the underworld upon the arrival of the Celts in Ireland and became the *sídh*, or faeries (MacCana 1983, 16; Low 1996, 44).<sup>3</sup> Though, like the *Illiad* and the *Odyssey* for Greek culture, these stories reveal a great deal about Irish mythology, they are infrequently cited by writers on Celtic spirituality. This might be because they tend to not promote environmentally friendly or peaceful values. The *Táin*, like the *Illiad*, involves exceptionally violent descriptions of battles and the cold indifference of the gods, primarily Morrigan, the goddess of death and war. Another tale, “Sweeney Astray,” set and written in the early medieval period in Ireland and recently translated by Seamus Heaney, likewise fails to conform to more Romantic ideas of Celtic beliefs. Sweeney is turned into a bird after the Battle of Moira and cursed to fly across Ireland. Though Sweeney richly describes the landscape below his flight, he laments his transformation and seeks his return to humanity. Nature in “Sweeney Astray” is not a happy place but a kind of prison, though the attention to detail by the poet and references to real places remain impressive (Heaney 1983). There also exist cycles of stories from the Welsh tradition, primarily the Four Branches of the *Mabinogi*. These stories were compiled by a Christian monk or group of monks sometime in the eleventh century and,

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<sup>3</sup> Many of the “faerie mounds” found throughout Britain and Ireland are actual Iron and Stone Age burial sites. This leads some to conclude that the *Tuatha Dé Danann* represent the pre-Celtic inhabitants of the region. See MacCana 1983, Rutherford 1987, Low 1996, and McIntosh 2005. Patrick Laviolette and Alastair McIntosh (1997) offer a very interesting argument that faerie hills, as liminal zones associated with mystical powers and cursed spirits and therefore largely avoided by developers through the years, represent islands of biodiversity in Britain and Ireland. Further exploration of this possible connection would be quite valuable to further study of the relationships between pagan beliefs and environmentally friendly practices.

like their Irish counterparts, involve the activities of Celtic gods and heroes such as Lleu Llaw Gyffes, Branwen of Llyr and Rhiannon (MacCana 1983, 72).

The druids, by many popular accounts, occupied the ecclesiastical and intellectual elite class in Celtic society. The Roman sources paint druids as both philosophical mystics and fearsome, power hungry sorcerers. It is certainly possible that they were both (Hutton 1999, 9). Along with the druids were the *filidh* and the bards, at least in insular Celtic areas. The *filidh* and bards composed and maintained poetry and legends, including the *dinnshenchas*, or stories related to historical and mythological events surrounding specific places. The offices of *filidh* and bards may have continued through the Christianization of Celtic lands, an important claim for the argument of a continued Celtic tradition. Proinsias MacCana says, “whereas the Druids, as the foremost representatives of pagan religion, had borne the brunt of the Church's opposition until they finally disappeared as a distinct order, the *filidh* succeeded in establishing a remarkable *modus vivendi* with the ecclesiastical authorities which allowed the two bodies separate but complimentary spheres of authority and permitted the *filidh* to continue many of their ancient functions and prerogatives, including some of which had formerly belonged to the druids” (MacCana 1983, 12-13). The bards and *filidh* survived, argues MaCana, by moving underground.

Some individuals resurrected the offices of bard and *filidh* during the Romantic pagan cultural revivals of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. In 1791, Unitarian minister Edward Williams, later renamed Iolo Morganwg, organized a Welsh *Gorsedd* (or meeting of bards) on Primrose Hill and in 1819 joined the Welsh *Eisteddfod* (a kind of bardic society). The Welsh *Gorsedd* and *Eisteddfod*, and the related Cornish *Gorseth*

(founded in 1928), were founded as secular celebrations of Welsh and Cornish culture and the bardic traditions of storytelling, singing and poetry but were later emphasized by persons such as Morganwg as continuations of pre-Christian religious tradition (Bowman 2005, 507). This tripartite division of Celtic religious culture—druid, *filidh*, and bard—remains influential for modern pagan groups. For example, the Order of Bards, Ovates and Druids, founded in 1964, promotes a hierarchical elevation through levels of learning through international mail and Internet correspondence courses (Bowman 2002, 83). Whether or not medieval bards and *filidh* retained their pre-Christian importance, or even existed, many popular writers today assume that the present traditional and esoteric knowledge of Celtic religion derives from their continued activity.

A final important aspect of Celtic religion, emphasized by modern pagan and Celtic Christian groups, involves the ritual calendar. This calendar includes eight main festivals, namely, Samhain (October 31-November 1, the beginning of the new year and time to remember the dead), Midwinter (the winter solstice, also called Yule), Imbolc (February 1, sacred to Brigid, celebration of fertility), Spring Equinox, Beltain (May 1, or May Day, important day for weddings), Summer Solstice (Midsummer, special for communion with non-human beings), Lughnasadh (harvest festival falling around August 1), and the Autumnal Equinox (Harvey 1997, 3-13). This ritual year is celebrated by many modern Celtic-based Druidic and Wiccan groups.

Though these festivals certainly refer to real traditions from Britain and Ireland, they may not have been shared by Continental Celts. Important for many Celtic Christians, however, is the correspondence between these Celtic holidays and Christian days. Imbolc, the day sacred to the goddess Brigid, is also the feast day of St. Brigit of

Kildare (de Waal 1997, 165-166). Samhain also corresponds to All Saints Day. These apparent holdovers from Celtic religions provide some support for the popular historical claims of modern Celtic Christians regarding cultural continuity in Ireland, Scotland and Wales. As Edward Sellner asserts, “this Celtic Christian spirituality was very much the child of the pagan culture which preceded it, one that valued poetic imagination and artistic creativity, kinship relations and the warmth of the heart, the wonder of stories and the guidance of dreams” (Sellner 1993, 16). Before turning to a more involved analysis of modern Celtic Christian beliefs, though, the history of the coming of Christianity to Celtic lands must be addressed in further detail.

### **Christianity in Celtic Lands**

Christianity was most likely brought to Britain by Roman soldiers and to Ireland by traders, though exact dates remain vague. Tertullian celebrated the rapid conversion to Christianity in Roman lands, including Britain, as early as the year 200 (McNeill 1974, 18-19). Literary evidence also points to three British martyrs in the third century, shortly before the 312 conversion of Constantine. In 314, three British bishops attended the council of Arles. The presence of bishops suggests that British Christians lived in relatively organized diocese. Little else is known of these early British Christians, however (Alcock 1989, 132). The development of Christianity also corresponded with the late fourth century withdrawal of Roman military forces from Britain and the subsequent fall of Rome to Alaric the Goth in 410. Saxons from the east quickly took lands in the former Roman territories of south Britain, and eventually solidified the small kingdoms of Britain into the Land of the Angles, or England. Exactly how it was done remains unclear, but in the transitional chaos, Christianity emerged as a powerful force in British culture. By the end of the fifth century, St. Germanus traveled to Britain from

Gaul in order to counter heresies among certain British Christian communities. The presence of heretical groups suggests an increasing number of Christians in Britain at this time (Hutton 1991, 261).

Christianity arrived in Ireland only shortly after its emergence in Britain. In the first centuries of the Common Era, the Celtic Irish occupied lands far beyond the present nation of Ireland, including present-day Wales, Cornwall and Scotland.<sup>4</sup> The first literary evidence for Christianity in Ireland comes from the year 431, when Pope Celestine I consecrated Palladius as the first bishop of Ireland. As R. P. C. Hanson notes, there must have been a substantial number of Christians already in Ireland for the pope to send a bishop, for “in the ancient world no bishop was ever sent to a place totally devoid of Christians” (Hanson 1995, 31). These Irish Christians surely had contact with the relatively well-established groups in Britain.

In Ireland, Palladius coordinated the establishment of monasteries and attempted to counter the political powers of the druids and the teachings of the monk Pelagius (Charles-Edwards 2000, 191). Pelagius, a native Briton and Roman citizen who lived from approximately 360 to 430, emphasized original goodness and the free will of humans to choose a life of salvation or sin. Since humans are born good and in the image of God, in Pelagian thought, the ability to choose a sanctified life comes from God as well, not just the human mind. Pelagius' teachings of free will and original goodness conflicted with the theological positions of many African bishops, including Augustine of Hippo. In 418, Augustine and others successfully petitioned Pope Zosimus to condemn

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<sup>4</sup> The Roman name for Ireland was *Scotia*, from which comes Scot and Scotland. Scotland, therefore, was named by the Romans after its Irish inhabitants, the Dál Riata, not the native Scottish Picts (Foster 2004, 9-10).

Pelagius for heresy by denying the power of grace (Nicholson 1995, 386-394). Supporters of modern Celtic Christianity, though, argue that the condemnation of Pelagius derived more from Church power politics than from unorthodoxy. According to M. Forthomme Nicholson, Pelagius' teachings and their popularity represented only regional interpretations of Biblical tradition, as he says, “Pelagius survived in Celtic Britain and in Ireland because his ideas were part of the local idiomatic expressions of the Christian faith” (Nicholson 1995, 392). Modern Celtic Christian theologians such as J. Phillip Newell also emphasize the particularly Celtic nature of Pelagian thought while at the same time arguing for his essential orthodoxy. The conflicts surrounding Pelagius show that Christianity in Britain and Ireland in the 5<sup>th</sup> century was active and highly dynamic, with connections to Continental churches and authorities.

Beyond Palladius and Pelagius, one of the most important early figures for modern Celtic Christianity is St. Patrick. Patrick, originally named Patricius, was born to a noble Romanized Christian family in modern England. The dates of his life remain vague and contested, though scholars general date his life from around 390 to 460, or roughly contemporary with Palladius and Pelagius (Hanson 1995, 28; Delaney 1983, 390). At the age of 16, Patrick was kidnapped by Irish raiders (a frequent occurrence at the time) and forced to work as a shepherd. After a few years, he escaped back to Britain and entered monastic training.<sup>5</sup> Patrick was then sent as bishop to Ireland by the British church, perhaps shortly after the mission of Palladius. In his life, Patrick wrote only two known documents—the *Confessions*, a kind of autobiography, and the *Letter to Coroticus*, a theological letter to a warlord who recently killed fellow Christians. These documents

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<sup>5</sup> According to Cahill, he did this in response to conversations with angels during his time as a shepherd in the wilds of Ireland (Cahill 1995, 116).

provide only a vague image of Patrick the person. According to R. P. C. Hanson (and perhaps contrary to popular accounts), Patrick had no particular love for the Irish people. After all, he lived there as a slave for several years. Instead, Patrick ventured to Ireland, the western edge of the known world, because “he believed that he was living in the last times and, in accordance with the perennial call of Christ to evangelize, he must preach the Gospel among the last people” (Hanson 1995, 33). According to Hanson, Patrick was only doing his part to bring about the return of Christ to the world.

Patrick's hagiographers, Muirchú and Tirechán, credit the saint with the foundation of the monastery at Armagh and the general conversion of the Irish people. According to his own writings, Patrick successfully adopted the children of several important Irish landholders into lives of monastic service and evangelism (Hanson 1995, 41). In his *Confessions*, Patrick notes much hostility regarding Christian conversion among the Irish people. He claims that he and his followers frequently experienced threats and occasionally purchased protection from warlords (Ó Cróinín 1995, 28). Patrick ultimately succeeded in the general conversion of Ireland, though, and by the year 500, shortly after his death, most of the island conformed to Christianity. In 560, the king Diarmait Mac Cerbaill conducted the last recorded pagan rite of the sacred wedding to the local goddess. After his death, accounts of pagan Celtic religion in Ireland disappeared, at least for a few centuries (Charles-Edwards 2000, 240; Hutton 1991, 262-263).

Along with Palladius and Patrick, several figures spread Christianity across Celtic lands through the foundation of monasteries. Enda and Finnian, working in the middle of the sixth century, founded several monasteries around Ireland (Delaney 1983, 162).

Columba, also called Columcille, who lived from about 521 to 597, left his royal family in Ulster (Northern Ireland) and founded the abbey at Iona, a small island off of the southwest coast of Scotland, in 563 (Delaney 1983, 125-126). David, who lived sometime in the 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> centuries, founded monasteries across Wales (Delaney 1983, 141). Brigid, who lived from about 450 to 525 and whose parents, according to legend, were baptized by St. Patrick, founded the large monastery and convent at Kildare around the year 470 (Delaney 1983, 92-93). These saints founded many of the first monasteries around Britain and Ireland which trained later monks who continued monastic development through the ninth century. Columbanus, who lived from about 540 to 615 and who trained at Bangor, left Ireland in 585 and traveled across France, Switzerland and Italy founding monasteries, including the large monastery at Bobbio (Delaney 1983, 126-127).

With such strong foundations and because of their relative remoteness, the monasteries of Ireland and Britain survived the chaos caused by the fall of Rome due to the invasions of pagan groups from the east in the sixth century. After the fall of Rome, Christians lost a major center of authority and Europe entered the so-called “dark ages.” The invading pagan armies of Goths, Visigoths and Vandals destroyed many churches and libraries across Europe and finally removed the drastically weakened political infrastructure of the Romans. During this period of crisis in Rome and other important Continental Christian centers, Irish monks such as Columbanus re-established monasteries and centers of learning across Europe and helped solidify Christian structures during the sixth and seventh centuries. Indeed, this is the thesis of Thomas



Cahill's 1995 book *How the Irish Saved Civilization: The Untold Story of Ireland's Historic Role from the Fall of Rome to the Rise of Medieval Europe*.

Although Britain and Ireland were becoming rapidly Christianized, the region remained politically chaotic. After the withdrawal of Roman troops, Britain divided into many small tribal kingdoms, much like Celtic Ireland. These kingdoms existed in almost constant warfare with each other, forming and breaking alliances frequently. At the same time, Saxon armies from Germany and France established kingdoms in southwest Britain, pushing Celtic peoples into Cornwall, Wales and Scotland. One of these Saxon kings, Oswy, perhaps desiring alliances with the increasingly powerful British Christian monasteries, called a council in 664 to solidify Christian doctrine in his lands and gain official monastic support. Delegates attended the synod at Whitby from Rome and from British and Irish churches. Because Bede recorded the proceedings of the Synod of Whitby, originally called Strenaeshalc, in his *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, much is known about the debates during the meeting (O'Loughlin 2000, 149). The Roman party, led by a Saxon monk named Wilfred, challenged the Pelagianism of the British and Irish churches and requested that they adopt the Roman style of tonsure and the Roman dating of Easter. After days of debate, Oswy accepted the arguments of the Roman contingent and enforced the conformity of churches in his lands to the Roman system (Lehane 2005, 191-203).

Among modern Celtic Christians, the Synod of Whitby represents the official defeat of the unified Celtic tradition by the overpowering forces of Rome. For Philip Newell, a popular writer on Celtic Christian theology, the victory of the Roman contingent at the Synod of Whitby alienated and ostracized the Celtic Christians of the

time, as he says, “the Church was the poorer for forcing Celtic spirituality underground, so that for centuries it survived primarily on the Celtic fringes of Britain, among people unsupported in their spirituality by clergy” (Newell 1997, 106). Donald Meek disagrees with Newell and says, instead, that Whitby involved only the unification of belief and teaching among the many British and Irish churches, not the repression of a distinct tradition by the powerful forces of Rome (Meek 2000, 138). While issues of political power probably influenced certain decisions made at the Council of Whitby, it probably did not represent the official repression of one distinct tradition over another. Numerous teachings competed throughout Christendom in the early medieval period, and councils meant to establish orthodoxy in a region were not an uncommon occurrence.

According to modern writers, the Celtic view of Christianity, despite the unification at Whitby, occasionally reappeared through the middle ages. Many modern Celtic Christians adopt the 9<sup>th</sup> century philosopher John Scotus Eriugena along with Pelagius as an early articulator of Celtic Christian theology. Eriugena, whose name means “John the Irishman from Ireland,” lived and trained as a monk in Ireland before moving to France to serve as a teacher under the patronage of Charles the Bald. While in France, Eriugena composed his major philosophical works, including the *Periphyseon*. Like Pelagius, Eriugena believed that the material world, as a creation of God, remained basically good and could reveal the wisdom of God. In his work *De Divisione Naturae*, Eriugena explained a certain interrelation between God and creation, where each creature existed as part of God while God remained, in a mysterious way, within each creature as well (Glacken 1967, 209-212). For Eriugena, God is the substance of creation, or as Geo Trevarthen explains Eriugena’s theology of creation, “creation *ex nihilo* is actually

creation *ex Deo*” (Trevarthen 281, 2005). Eriugena also believed that the material world of nature was not inherently evil. John O’Meara summarizes Eriugena’s position as follows: “there is no natural cause for the illicit misuse of free will or of evil. Just as evil is uncaused and none can discover whence it comes, so the unruly misuse of natural goods arises from no natural cause” (O’Meara 1988, 149). While Eriugena is somewhat separated from the “golden age” of Celtic Christianity in the fourth through seventh centuries, his thought resembles that of Pelagius and is often taken by modern writers as another example of a particularly Celtic interpretation of Christian doctrine.

After the Council of Whitby, Christianity remained dynamic and diverse throughout Britain and Ireland. The Celtic tradition, though, as argued by Newell and other popular writers, went underground (except for occasional related theologies like that of Eriugena) only to fully reemerge a millennium later. Popular writers of the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, inspired by works like Alexander Carmichael's *Carmina Gadelica*, argued that Celtic Christian knowledge, or the syncretistic pagan and Christian teachings of the Celtic Church, remained on the outskirts of Britain and Ireland after the Council of Whitby and could hence be revived.

### **Romantic Revivals and the “Celtic Twilight”**

In the eighteenth century, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Edmund Burke, Friedrich Wilhelm Schelling, and Johann Wolfgang von Goethe developed the literary and philosophical elements of Romanticism (Jasper 2005). Romantics, as Tilar Mazzeo explains, “sought to reinvigorate those aspects of human knowledge and experience that the Enlightenment had pushed aside. These included: attention to mysticism and psychological supernaturalism and a thematic emphasis on the value of the imagination, sentimentalism, natural spiritualism, and pastoralism” (Mazzeo 2005, 1424). In Britain

and Germany, Romanticism led some to reexamine pagan traditions, though usually from a Christian or deist context. Goethe, for example, expressed admiration for Greek and Roman pagan deities as “symbols for his own deep experiences” while at the same time retaining belief in the one Christian God (Hutton 1999, 21-22).

At roughly the same time, William Stukeley, an English Anglican minister, wrote a popular history of Stonehenge in which he argued that the druids “had a religion so extremely like Christianity that in effect it differed from it only in this: they believed in a Messiah who was to come into this world, as we believe in him that is to come” (quoted in Bradley 1999, 107). In his work, Stukeley both promoted the false belief that Celtic druids constructed Stonehenge and articulated the position that British pagan traditions and Christianity needed not be contradictory. In the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, George Petrie, a Protestant Scot whose family relocated to Dublin during his childhood, wrote popular accounts of the spiritual power found around ruined Irish monastic sites. His work promoted some of the earliest spiritual tourism to Ireland, especially to the monastic ruins at Clonmacnoise (Bradley 1999, 112). The works of Stukeley and Petrie also represented early attempts to establish roots through Celtic culture. Stukeley and Petrie, both Protestants, found historical precedents for their Romantic Christian beliefs in prehistorical Celtic culture. As early as the writings of Stukeley and Petrie, Celtic Christianity involved a continuous, rooted tradition, available to all who believed, not just those who fit any required ethnicity.

In the nineteenth century, these Romantic currents led to an explosion of alternative religious development across Europe and North America. This “nineteenth century spiritual hothouse,” a term used by Sarah Pike and borrowed from Jon Butler, witnessed

the emergence of Transcendentalism, Spiritualism, Theosophy, and health movements such as Christian Science (Pike 2004, 42). Each of these traditions, in its own way, offered alternative approaches to life and spirituality and, through their popularity, helped generate an environment amenable to the blending of pagan and Christian beliefs.

Another major event in the history of modern Celtic Christianity came with the 1900 publication of Alexander Carmichael's *Carmina Gadelica*, or “The Songs of the Gaels.” Working as a tax collector, Carmichael traveled Scotland's remote western Islands. As a native Gaelic speaker, Carmichael became interested in the prayers spoken by the local inhabitants, and from 1855 to 1899, recorded them (Meek 2000, 60). For Carmichael, these prayers and incantations represented examples of a continuous tradition which blended pagan and Christian beliefs. In the introduction to his work, Carmichael speculated, “some of the hymns may have been composed within the cloistered cells of Derry and Iona, and some of the incantations among the cromlechs of Stonehenge and the standing-stones of Callarnis” (Carmichael 2001, 30). The people Carmichael questioned also lived on the fringes of British society, far from the Victorian culture of London, as he said, “these poems were composed by the learned, but they have not come down through the learned, but through the unlearned—not through the lettered few, but through the unlettered many—through the crofters and cottars, the herdsmen and shepherds, of the Highlands and Islands” (Carmichael 2001, 30). For Carmichael, the prayers and incantations of the *Carmina Gadelica* represented a continuous oral tradition held by those with little contact with the intellectual fads of the cities. In 1906, Douglas Hyde conducted a similar project in Ireland with his *Religious Songs of Connacht*.

The integrity of the oral tradition remains important for modern Celtic Christians, and for scholars such as Oliver Davies and Fiona Bowie, the recorded oral tradition provides perhaps the best account of true Celtic Christian spiritual belief (Davies and Bowie 1997, 17). Whether the works of Carmichael and Hyde reveal pre-Christian beliefs among late nineteenth century Scots and Irish people, they have certainly inspired later thinkers to develop what is now called Celtic Christianity.

Celtic spirituality received another important advocate in 1893 when the Irish poet W. B. Yeats coined the term “Celtic Twilight.” Yeats examined the folk stories of rural Ireland in an attempt to construct an Irish Celtic mythology. Yeats himself was involved in Alastair Crowley's Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn, a precursor to modern witchcraft, and other mystical and esoteric organizations such as the Rosicrucians and the Theosophical Society. Within the “Celtic Twilight” movement, Yeats and others attempted to elevate the pagan Celtic tradition as itself a mystical system of esoteric knowledge and situated early Christian saints such as Patrick and Brigid as vessels of that knowledge (Bradley 1999, 139-140). Though his works on Celtic folklore and mythology remained influential to Celtic Christians, Yeats was more interested in the pagan and mystical elements of Celtic history. These more mystical and pagan elements of the “Celtic Twilight” influenced the development of modern Celtic New Age and Neopagan traditions.

Donald Meek, a Gaelic-speaking native of the Scottish island of Tiree, argues that many of the modern problems with Celtic Christianity solidified within the “Celtic Twilight” movement. Speaking of Celts as a single group and Celtic spirituality as a single thing, he asserts, misrepresents the diversity of belief and culture around Britain

and Ireland (Meek 2000, 6). Meek also notes that the Celts themselves would not have considered themselves at the fringes of society—they only appear on the outskirts of the world from British and Continental perspectives (Meek 2000, 81). Finally, the emphasis upon the primitive purity of the Celts continues, for Meek, in the British tradition of the oppression of the other by romanticizing simplicity and effectively removing from modern Celtic peoples their ability or right to modernize (Meek 2000, 76). Malcolm Chapman also notes this issue of oppressive colonialist anthropology in his 1978 work *The Gaelic Vision in Scottish Culture*, arguing that British anthropologists mapped their primitivist perceptions onto their analyses of local rural communities. He argues that, “when European anthropologists began to turn their attention to European societies, they tended to choose areas that approximated in ‘primitive’ status to those that their Africanist colleagues had studied” (Chapman 1978, 181). Not all of the early modern promoters of Celtic spirituality, however, followed Yeats’ Romantic views of Celtic culture or accepted his emphasis upon mysticism. An early example of Christian Celtic spirituality came with the Reverend George MacLeod.

George MacLeod, who founded the Iona Community in 1938, was an important figure in the evolution of modern Celtic Christianity. After serving in World War I, MacLeod followed in his family tradition and became a Presbyterian minister, serving in Glasgow (Ferguson 1990, 71). In Glasgow, MacLeod began preaching in the Govan region, an impoverished industrial area greatly affected by the economic depressions of the 1920's. MacLeod believed that Christianity, with its traditions of works and community, offered a solution to the problems of the impoverished residents of Govan. Ron Ferguson, MacLeod’s biographer, said of MacLeod's beliefs, “he believed the

Christian gospel was the answer to the problems of society, and that the main obstacle to belief was the fact that the Church was not living its message in ways which commended it to ordinary people” (Ferguson 1990, 142). In the 1930's, MacLeod sought a location for the development of a Christian community based on works and service. He found the historically-rich isle of Iona. Columba built the first abbey on Iona in 563 which was abandoned sometime in the twelfth century. In 1203, a group of Benedictines reestablished the abbey. It became an important spiritual center and the burial place of local kings. During the Reformation, though, the community of Benedictines was pushed out and the abbey left to crumble. In the 1800's, based on the Romantic writings of those such as George Petrie, the ruins became a popular attraction for those seeking inspiration from the Celtic past (Ferguson 1990, 153-154). In 1899, the Duke of Argyll donated funds for the refurbishment of the abbey, which was completed in 1910. The basic structures existed when, in 1937, MacLeod proposed the establishment of a semi-permanent community in the Abbey (Ferguson 1990, 163). In 1938, the Scottish Heritage authorities granted permission to MacLeod's scheme and the Iona Community was born.

The Iona Community continues today as perhaps one of the most recognizable Celtic Christian communities, although its headquarters moved to Glasgow. The community sponsors educational and spiritual workshops across Scotland and offers regular non-denominational services in the abbey. To become a member of the Iona Community one must undertake a two year training program and live and work on the island, although the community also includes associate members who attend regular workshops. Currently, there are nearly 250 members who have completed the program



and nearly 3,000 associate members and friends around the world who support the community.<sup>6</sup> The Iona Community also operates the Wild Goose Press in Glasgow, which publishes many books related to Celtic spirituality and spreads MacLeod's message of ecumenical Christian service for peace and equality (Bradley 2000, 45-48). While MacLeod cared mainly about issues of social justice, the Iona Community later moved to include issues of ecological justice among its concerns.

Though Iona remains among the most well-known modern Celtic Christian communities, it is not alone. The smaller Community of Aidan and Hilda, founded by Anglican ministers in 1994 and based on the isle of Lindisfarne, also supports a small group of permanent resident members, sponsors spiritual workshops, and engages in community works. Dara Molloy, a self-identified Celtic priest, also conducts Celtic Christian services and weddings on the Arran Islands in western Ireland. Molloy was ordained as a Marist Priest but left in the mid-1980's to start a family and live as a Celtic monk in the rural Arran Islands. His *An Charraig* community, in which he and his family live, operates organic gardens and recruits international volunteers for cultural restoration projects around western Ireland. Molloy also operates an Internet magazine called *The Aisling* which publishes articles, poetry and stories related to Celtic spirituality.<sup>7</sup>

In North America, the Celtic Christian Communion represented several Celtic-inspired Christian congregations, including the Anamchara Celtic Church, the Church of the Culdees, and the Celtic Christian Church. Though the Celtic Christian Communion dissolved in 1997 due to theological disagreements, its former member congregations

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<sup>6</sup> The Iona Community. "About the Community." <<http://www.iona.org.uk/community/main.htm>> 2003. Last viewed March 16, 2006.

<sup>7</sup> See [www.aislingmagazine.com](http://www.aislingmagazine.com) for more information on Molloy and his community.

remain and sponsor missions of evangelism around the world (Meek 2000, 18). For many North American communities, as the Methodist theologian George C. Hunter III argues, Celtic Christianity offers useful models for evangelism and aids in the conversion of the non-Christian masses (Hunter 2000, 53-54).

In the modern context, Celtic Christianity generally refers to a spiritual orientation based in the historical lives and practices of medieval Christians in Celtic lands. This includes ecumenism, evangelism and education. Individual Celtic Christians generally remain active within a particular Christian tradition, such as Anglicanism, Episcopalianism and Catholicism (except for rare examples like Dara Molloy), but refer to the inspiration of the Celtic tradition for modern Christian life.

Celtic Christianity emerged out of Romantic religious revivals of recent centuries involving resurgences of interest in Celtic peoples. This chapter has shown that several popular claims made by Celtic Christians and others influenced by the general Celtic revival, as many critics argue, lack historical support. For modern believers, though, Celtic Christianity is a reconfiguration of a continuous spiritual tradition situated within regular patterns of Christian belief. As a reinterpretation of Christian belief and practice, some argue that Celtic Christianity poses no real threat to modern peoples in formerly Celtic lands. Philip Sheldrake, in his popular works on Celtic Christianity, responds to historical criticisms and seeks to provide a more historically accurate version of the tradition, as he argues, “I believe that the Celtic tradition of Christianity deserves to be retrieved . . . however, it also deserves a less romanticized and more balanced treatment” (Sheldrake 1995, 3). Oliver Davies also attempts to situate the emergence of Celtic Christianity within normal processes of religious development, arguing that “in many

ways Christianity lives by its ability to rediscover its past. The history of Christianity shows a constant tendency toward invigorating revival and rediscovery of its roots as well as to polemics surrounding the varying definitions of tradition. Celtic Christianity offers just such a renewal” (Davies 1999, 24). Despite its close relationships with pagan and New Age traditions, or at least those based in Celtic mythology and inspiration, modern Celtic Christianity represents a fully Christian spiritual orientation, accepting the divinity of Jesus, the transcendence of God and the reality of the Trinity. Chapter 3 turns to a deeper analysis of many of the basic theological beliefs and ritual practices of modern Celtic Christians.

### CHAPTER 3 MODERN THEOLOGY AND PRACTICE

As the previous chapter has shown, much less is known about early Christian and pre-Christian Ireland and Britain than many supporters of Celtic spiritualities presume or claim. Nonetheless, Celtic Christians base their emerging theologies in historical contexts, claiming the historical support of saints, scholars and institutions. This chapter turns to a deeper analysis of the theology of modern Celtic Christians in order to better understand Celtic Christianity as a spiritual tradition. Beyond the historical story, this includes arguments for the legitimacy of modern Celtic Christian belief, historical and contemporary theological statements, and practices related to ecological and social justice. Analyzing these arguments from the religious studies perspective identified by Chidester (1988) helps situate Celtic Christianity among other Christian movements.

While Celtic Christianity remains a diverse movement, without any official doctrinal position, some common features exist through the works of popular writers. Adherents often value the natural world as God's creation and hold it as essentially good and as a source of knowledge concerning God. This manifests itself in creation-centered theologies, such as those of J. Phillip Newell and Seán Ó Duinn, and in support of environmental care and sustainability, as with the efforts of members of the Iona Community. Many also emphasize the powers of the saints and members of the Trinity. Though further surveys regarding the beliefs and practices of self-identifying Celtic Christians would be helpful, popular writers nonetheless reveal important general aspects

of modern Celtic Christian theology, and so, help construct an image of the beliefs of modern Celtic Christians.

### **Issues of Legitimacy and Authority**

Many popular Celtic Christian writers employ several strategies for claiming authority for the modern construction of the Celtic past. These strategies include establishing historical continuity for certain important Celtic Christian beliefs, including the care for creation, the power of the saints, and Trinitarianism, and arguing for indigenous status for the Celts. Many critics challenge the accuracy of popular notions of historical continuity and point to issues of power and domination in the appropriation and syncretism noted in modern Celtic Christianity. Examining these differing supportive and critical arguments, though, shows that most parties seek to legitimate some historical account and vision of a proper religion over others.

For some, the Celtic tradition remains constant from the introduction of Christianity in Celtic lands to the present day because of a certain cultural conservatism among Celtic peoples. Phillip Newell, a prolific writer on Celtic Christian themes, summarizes this historical perspective as follows: “Celtic spirituality is neither simply a thing of the past nor a twentieth-century phenomenon. Rather, it is a spirituality that characterized the young British Church from as early as the fourth century. Although it was pushed out to the Celtic fringes after Augustine of Canterbury's Roman mission in 597, it has always managed to survive in one form or another, usually on the edges of formal religion” (Newell 1997, 2-3). According to Timothy Joyce, an American Benedictine monk, Celtic culture retains its essential features well, despite outside influences and historical change. He says, “because of that slowness to change, we are able to reach back into the ancient mind with some ease” (Joyce 1998, 4). Such

statements directly contradict the arguments made by historians that, because of the lack of written evidence, the “ancient minds,” to use Joyce’s terminology, of Celtic peoples remain forever shrouded in the mists of time.

Popular writers sometimes establish this continuity by reference to theological holdovers from pre-Christian religions, including the care for creation due to a recognition of the immanence of deities, the importance of the saints and Trinitarianism. According to writers such as Newell, care for creation, which remains a central theological tenet of modern Celtic Christianity, derives from pre-Christian nature worship. As Newell claims, “the Celtic tradition has a strong sense of the wildness of God” (Newell 1999a, 20). Esther de Waal, another popular writer on Celtic Christian spirituality, expresses the continuity of care for creation through a discussion of the broad Celtic family. She says, “Celtic spirituality is corporate spirituality with a deep sense of connectedness to the earth itself and the natural elements, to the human family, not only the present immediate family into which each of us is born, but the extended family as it stretches back in time through the many generations” (de Waal 1997, 38). Philip Sheldrake situates Celtic Christianity within broader trends of medieval religious syncretism, arguing, “as any student of medieval ‘magic’ knows, continuities with a pre-Christian past were quite common throughout Europe during the Middle Ages. However, it is fair to say that the Church in Celtic lands took over wholesale so many of the existing cultural and social structures that it seemed to Christianize traditional religion in a more systematic way” (Sheldrake 1995, 9). Citing historical precedents, Newell, de Waal and Sheldrake claim historical continuity between medieval Celtic Christianity and their own modern beliefs.

Though it is rooted in pre-Christian cultures, many popular writers seek to distinguish Celtic Christianity from paganism by retaining the importance of God and emphasizing the peaceful coexistence of Christianity and paganism. In an important historical claim, Newell says of medieval Christians in Britain and Ireland, “it was typical of the Celtic Church to see its worship of Christ as building on the truths and symbols of the mysticism that had preceded Christianity in Britain. Aspects of its ancient mythology and nature religion were the equivalent of an Old Testament for the Celtic mission. Christ was the fulfillment of all that was true, whether that was of the priestly and prophetic traditions of Judaism or of its own Celtic druidical past” (Newell 1999a, 21). He also says of Christian interactions with pre-Christian beliefs, “the gospel was seen as fulfilling rather than destroying the old Celtic mythologies” (Newell 1997, 27). For Newell, Christianity and paganism coexisted peacefully in Celtic lands and even exchanged certain beliefs and practices. This connection between pre-Christian druids and Celtic Christians mirrors claims made by early British druid revivalists of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. As early as 1680, historian John Aubrey connected the stone circles at Stonehenge and Avebury with druidic activities, based upon the literature available at the time and his own imagination. Anglican vicar William Stukeley continued Aubrey's arguments and claimed that the Celtic druids basically accepted the tenets of Christianity (Green 1997, 141-143).

Newell and other modern Celtic Christian writers, however, avoid fully equating Celtic Christianity with paganism. He says of a poem celebrating the moon in the *Carmina Gadelica*, “it was not the light of the moon that was being worshipped but the Light within the light” (Newell 2000, 100). Oliver Davies similarly argues that

Christianity integrated certain pagan traditions in Britain and Ireland without compromising important Christian beliefs and teachings. He argues that this willingness to coexist peacefully with other belief systems distinguishes Celtic Christianity from Roman Catholicism in general and other modern Protestant traditions. Davies says, “those aspects of 'Celtic' Christianity that most appeal to us today are precisely the sources that convey the sense of this integralism, and do so in a distinctively Christian coding” (Davies 1997, 21-22). In this way, Celtic Christianity becomes a tradition rooted in pre-Christian culture that nonetheless retains basically Christian beliefs.

Stories of the saints provide a second important connection between modern Celtic Christians and historical Christians in Celtic lands. The saints, in popular accounts, remained important to early Christians in Celtic lands largely because they occasionally took on the attributes and duties of pre-Christian gods and goddesses. Prayers in the *Carmina Gadelica* call upon saints such as Patrick, Brigid and Columba for help with daily chores, revealing a belief in the real agency of saints as supernatural aids (Bradley 1999, 157). For example, Esther de Waal says, “Celtic saints are approachable, close at hand, woven quite naturally into life just as would be any other member of an extended family. It is this that sets them apart from the great saints of the Western Church, who were made saints by formal canonization through the process of a centralized ecclesiastical machinery” (de Waal 1997, 162). Of course, de Waal neglects to say that the Celtic saints, too, were formally canonized by the “centralized ecclesiastical machinery.” Like de Waal, Edward Sellner argues that the lives of Celtic saints represent spiritual tools for awareness and a deepening kinship with the love and suffering of Jesus (Sellner 1993, 43). In his *Wisdom of the Celtic Saints* (1993), Sellner provides



summarized accounts of the lives of nineteen saints from across Ireland and Britain. His work is not meant to be a history of the saints, though, but a spiritual guide to be read “with an openness to what the stories themselves can teach us about God, holiness, and our own great mysteries” (Sellner 1993, 42). The Celtic saints, like many aspects of Celtic Christian spirituality, exist in a nebulous world between historical accuracy and spiritual inspiration. For writers like Sellner, what “really” happened does not matter so much as what stories of what happened might tell us of our relationships to the world and God.

Trinitarianism is a third theological feature claimed by Celtic Christians to connect to pre-Christian religious beliefs. As earlier mentioned, there is evidence that the number three held special significance in pre-Christian Celtic religion and society. Some modern Celtic Christians argue that pre-Christian Celts adopted Church Trinitarianism early because of these pre-existing affinities for triple deities. For example, Timothy Joyce states, “to the Celts, who already thought in terms of threes, this must have seemed very natural. They had already thought of their pagan deities in symbolic and abstract images” (Joyce 1998, 19). Several popular anthologies of Celtic spiritual writings include the *Lorica Sancti Patritii*, or “St. Patrick's Breastplate,” a poem allegedly written by St. Patrick but tracing only to the eighth century. “St. Patrick's Breastplate” is a prayer for protection, “a deeply Christian protection prayer that yet carries along with it some of the flavour of pre-Christian invocations that were no less sincerely spoken and sung for the same purpose of protection” (O'Donoghue 1995, 49-50). Importantly, this eighth century prayer begins with a strong statement of Trinitarianism: “For my shield this day I call / A mighty power / The Holy Trinity / Affirming threeness / Confessing oneness / In the

making of all / Through love” (O'Donoghue 1995, 46). Esther de Waal mirrors the sentiment of the *Lorica* almost exactly, as she says, “the God whom the Celtic people know is above all the Godhead who is Trinity, the God whose very essence is that of a threefold unity of persons, three persons bound in a unity of love” (de Waal 1997, 38). For de Waal and others, the Trinitarianism of the medieval author of the *Lorica* remains an applicable spiritual orientation for Celtic Christians today.

Another related strategy for developing authority for modern Celtic Christian beliefs is to claim for the Celts indigenous status. For example, Timothy Joyce says of the Celts, “they are recognized as the 'European Aborigines,' like Native American tribes already on the land with their own developed culture prior to being conquered, driven out, or assimilated by more powerful invaders” (Joyce 1998, 1). Alastair McIntosh, a Scottish activist and scholar, reports similar instances of identification between modern Scottish activists and Native North Americans. After viewing a television program on Native Americans, Torcuil MacRath, an elderly friend of McIntosh's, commented, “they said that their culture is dying. They said it's because the Circle, the Sacred Hoop, has been broken . . . It's the same for us. It's the same for the Gael . . . Because when I heard them on the television, those Indians, I understood instantly what they meant” (quoted in McIntosh 2001, 51). Interestingly, Sulian Stone Eagle Herney, a Mi'Kmaq activist brought to Scotland by McIntosh, recognized this indigenous connection as well. While visiting a community development project in Glasgow, Stone Eagle said, “your situation is the same as ours,” referring to the inner-city poverty and dislocation of the Scottish people (quoted in McIntosh 2001, 244). The idea of “Celticity” provides a sense of roots

for modern, industrialized individuals who might feel separated from their cultural heritage.

As indicated by the quote from Joyce above, this argument for indigenosity often includes the story of the oppression of the Celtic tradition by the powerful forces of the Roman Church at the Synod of Whitby, and later, by the Protestant British. McIntosh frequently cites the oppression of the Scottish highlanders by the British ruling elites, beginning with the 1746 Battle of Culloden Moor, when the British forces defeated the Scottish, forcing the nobles to cede their land to British lords. This initiated the period of lairdship which led to the Highland Clearances of the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, when thousands of Highland crofters were moved off of their land by the British lords in order to provide grazing land for sheep (McIntosh et al. 1994, 64-65). The Irish point to the period of famine in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century caused by the spread of potato blight as an example of British oppression. The British lords who controlled the Irish farms refused to reduce the potato export during the famine, forcing the Irish to live on the bare remainders. To rediscover the Celts, then, is to rediscover a people long marginalized by the dominant British culture, according to some Celtic Christians.

Some scholars, however, reverse this argument of oppression and say that the popular equation of Celtic culture with Native American and other indigenous cultures involves the continued cultural exploitation of these traditions from dominant social groups. Marion Bowman, a scholar of modern British religious movements including Celtic Christianity, argues that the Celts have become “Britain's Noble Savages,” or that they represent an idealized, environmentally friendly past (Bowman 1993, 154). For Donald Meek, appropriations of indigenous traditions and inventions of indigenous pasts

come from issues of power and guilt. He says, “the romantic repossession of regions and cultures which have been abused by imperialism seems to be one of the ways by which the well-heeled, modern descendants of the conquerors come to terms with their own and their forefathers' misdeeds” (Meek 2000, 32-33). Celtic Christianity, for Meek, represents one such instance of the repossession of an oppressed culture by members of a dominant culture. This resembles Phillip Deloria's arguments regarding the place of Indians in American identities and power dynamics. The possession and repossession of native traditions occurs in a kind of reciprocal dynamic of power. Deloria argues, “the self-defining pairing of American truth with American freedom rests on the ability to wield power against Indians—social, military, economic, and political—while simultaneously drawing power from them” (Deloria 1998, 191). This argument might be applied to Celtic Christianity as well. The Irish, Scottish and Welsh people, who have been historically marginalized in British society, nonetheless serve a legitimizing function for their very oppressors.

It should be noted, though, that critics of appropriation such as Meek are not simply neutral parties in debates over cultural ownership, but subtly claim for themselves certain rights to speak for a culture as well. For Meek, as noted above, Celtic Christianity involves the guilt-inspired repossession of and identification with oppressed cultures. Although he criticizes the Romanticism of the oppressors, Meek's own position simplifies Celtic peoples as well. As Bron Taylor notes, “some critics of appropriation seem to assume, for example, that cultural traditions can or should be immutable and geographically enclosed. Such assumptions are historically naïve and contain logic that would relegate all religion to the ‘dustbin of history’, unable to adapt to cultural and

evolutionary developments” (Taylor 1997, 199). While issues of oppression remain vitally important, it also remains important to analyze the perspectives of those who would so readily criticize all appropriation. Again, as Taylor notes, a study by André Droogers “shows that opponents of syncretic processes are often resisting threats to their own hegemony over religious production” (Taylor 1997, 199). In the Celtic context, it is worth examining to what degree critics such as Meek seek, through their criticisms, to preserve a specific idea of the past as well.

Beyond the issue of cultural appropriation, connections between ethnicity and belief remain highly problematic for many scholars as well. Malcolm Chapman notes, “the Celts, therefore, have a long history of being tied up in a discourse of race, language and culture—a discourse which has indeed, in an important sense, created them” (Chapman 1992, 20). Meek warns against the ethnification of the Celts and points to the work of the nineteenth century philologist Ernest Renan as an example of the possible problems of creating an ethnic-based religion with Celtic Christianity. Renan painted the early Celtic Church as a “pure” institution, valuing only Celtic saints and pre-Celtic pagan beliefs (Meek 2000, 47). When believers speak so freely of “Celtic” spirituality, they perhaps unwittingly connect belief to ethnicity. One might ask if one must be a Celt to follow Celtic Christianity.

Modern writers, however, frequently take pains to avoid the identification of Celtic Christianity with one specific race. Philip Newell says that, since the original insights of the medieval Celtic Christians came from God, they remain open to all, as he says of his spirituality, “its starting-point is not an experience that separates one group of people from another but a gift that we all have been given” (Newell 1999a, xi). Marion Bowman

also notes the emergence of “cardiac Celts,” or those who “feel in their hearts that they are Celtic” (Bowman 1996, 246). In this way, “Celticity” becomes more a state of mind than an ethnic designation. Alastair McIntosh, who has done much to promote the inclusion of diverse cultural traditions in Scotland, argues that “‘Celticity’ therefore takes on a meaning that can be bigger than ethnographic and linguistic definitions alone: it becomes a code for reconnection with human community, with the natural world and with God” (McIntosh 2001, 20). The Celt is a symbol for the Celtic Christian, not an ethnically idealized ancestor.

Along with revealing historical inaccuracies and the problems of ethnification, many critics point to issues of consumerism, secularization and individualism as reasons to doubt the validity of Celtic Christianity. Ian Bradley notes that the term “Celtic” has become a marketing tool for books, tourism and other items such as Celtic crosses (Bradley 1999, 218-219). Donald Meek similarly notes that “to be ‘Celtic’ is to be trendy, cool, ‘other’ and even marketable. The word moves easily from the market to the monastery, and back again, as secularisation takes its toll of even the most hallowed spiritual icons” (Meek 2000, 9). Celtic Christianity loses its meaning for Meek and Bradley when it becomes something that any individual may buy or find on the Internet without any connection to historical communities.

Celtic Christianity is certainly heavily marketed, but so are many other religions and Christian traditions. Criticizing religious consumerism does not help explain why it occurs or what it means for those engaged in it. Furthermore, those who market Celtic culture to tourists (and those who buy it) are not necessarily the same as those who find deep inspiration in the modern Celtic tradition. Again, Meek and to a lesser degree

Bradley seek an idealized Celtic past, before consumerism desacralized its most holy features. Issues of consumerism and the related radical individualism go deeper, culturally, than Meek and Bradley seem to accept. In the American context, for example, Robert Bellah and his colleagues argue that religious individualism is part of American culture, as they say, “religious individualism is, in many ways, appropriate in our kind of society. It is no more going to go away than is secular individualism” (Bellah et al. 1996, 247). Consumerism, or the excessive emphasis placed upon the act of consumption of goods, seems to be a general feature of modern Western cultures. To point at the consumerism and individualism in Celtic Christianity and to base a critical argument around it, as do Meek and Bradley, inaccurately withdraws forms of Celtic spirituality from the greater consumerist cultural milieu.

In contrast to Meek and Bradley, supporters of Celtic Christianity offer their tradition as a potential *solution* to the problems of secularization and individualistic consumer culture. Seán Ó Duinn, for example, says, “while death beckons menacingly at the once great [Celtic] civilization, a lingering breath still remains which perhaps could be the breath of life for the jaded victims of the consumer society” (Ó Duinn 2002, 21). John Ó Ríordáin similarly says, “as we struggle today to humanize and Christianize our industrial and consumerist urban society, we might learn from our pagan and Christian ancestors something of their healing and harmonious relationship with the permanent underlying realities of earth and sea and sky, and the changing seasons of the year” (Ó Ríordáin 1996, 85). Others, rather than focusing solely upon individual spiritual attainment, emphasize the community involved in the modern Celtic tradition. Timothy Joyce says, “Celtic spirituality will not allow us to go it alone. It is never just between

me and God. The community is important for that is where I know who I am” (Joyce 1998, 156). While Ó Duinn, Ó Ríordáin and Joyce might not represent all Celtic Christians, and while their words might not translate into actual practices, they show that Celtic Christianity itself contains important tools for believers to counter the harmful effects of individualist consumer culture. Critiques of Celtic Christianity as individualistic consumer spirituality, then, neglect important points made by the popular writers of the tradition.

Celtic Christianity is a complex movement, involving several sometimes competing and contradictory historical and theological claims. Issues of historical legitimacy and authenticity, though, provide only part of the Celtic Christian system of belief. Celtic Christianity also includes now well-developed theologies, based in historical precedents, but also shaped by and relevant to modern cultural contexts.

### **Important Themes in Modern Celtic Christian Theology**

The popular works of J. Phillip Newell, Seán Ó Duinn, Esther de Waal, Timothy Joyce, Philip Sheldrake and others provide important information about general theological beliefs of many modern Celtic Christians. These writers, particularly Newell, often draw upon the works of Pelagius and Eriugena to define Celtic Christian theology against what they view as the harmful doctrines of Augustine. Though they align themselves with persons considered heterodox by the Roman Catholic Church, these popular writers and theologians still claim for Celtic Christianity a basic level of orthodoxy. Popular writers often use the emphasis upon creation and the goodness of God, Trinitarianism and the importance of saints to help distinguish their Christian spirituality from other New Age and Neopagan spiritualities which also draw from the Celtic context.



J. Phillip Newell, a Church of Scotland minister from Canada, former Warden of Iona Abbey and current scholar in residence at St. Giles Cathedral in Edinburgh, is perhaps one of the most prolific writers on Celtic Christian theology. In his several volumes he outlines some of the most important general characteristics of modern Celtic Christianity. Though his work provides a basis for this section, it is not definitive of all Celtic Christian theology. Other writers are introduced to emphasize agreements on certain points and to reveal important differences in popular Celtic Christian thought.

In his work, Newell emphasizes God's revelations in the natural world in a form of the “two book” metaphor. The “two book” metaphor involves recognition of the Book of Nature or “the Christian concept of nature as a book, written by the hand of God and serving as a companion volume to the book of Scripture” (Gould 2005, 210). Utilizing this idea of the Book of Nature in a meditation and prayer guide entitled *Promptings from Paradise* (1998) Newell says, “hearing the Word in the church and hearing the Word in the world are not opposed to each other” (Newell 1998, 13). Philip Sheldrake agrees with Newell’s Book of Nature approach and states that, for medieval Celtic Christians, “nature was a kind of second sacred book, parallel to the scriptures, that revealed the divine” (Sheldrake 1995, 73). This Book of Nature teaches beyond the reach of Christian literature, as Newell says, “the mystery of God was being communicated in the world, through creation and in the lives of men and women, long before religion came into being. In fact it was the hearing of God in the world that gave rise to religion. In the Christian tradition we may claim a two-thousand-year tradition of hearing God in the church's mysteries of word and sacrament. It needs always, however, to be set in the context of the fifteen-billion-year tradition of God speaking in creation” (Newell 1998,

14). In this quote, Newell reveals a certain universalism and acceptance of geological science in his creation-centered theology.

Newell argues that this focus upon creation, or the Book of Nature, is and has always been a critical feature of Celtic Christianity. He emphasizes this point in several of his writings. He says, “where do we look, therefore, to learn of God? It is not away from ourselves and away from creation, but deep within all that has life. That is where the truth of God is hidden, like treasure, buried in a field” (Newell 1999a, xvi). He also states, in a meditation upon the seven days of creation, “at the heart of all that has life is the light of God. This is a fundamental belief of the Celtic tradition” (Newell 1999a, 3). Elsewhere Newell says, “the feature of Celtic spirituality that is probably most widely recognized, both within and outside the Church, is its creation emphasis” (Newell 1997, 3). God’s truth inhabits creation and remains knowable and accessible to those with sufficient sensitivities.

Seán Ó Duinn, a Benedictine monk from Limerick, also asserts that there is a special attention placed on creation within the Celtic tradition. Ó Duinn also makes clear, however, that the medieval Celtic Christians also accepted the transcendence of God, remaining theologically orthodox, as he says, “there was no difference in belief in this matter between the Celts and other Christians; both parties held that God was both transcendent and immanent, as is necessary for orthodoxy, but the Celts tended to place particular emphasis on the immanence of God” (Ó Duinn 2002, 8). The Lutheran theologian Paul Santmire also argues for the orthodoxy of early Celtic Christians, asserting that the reverence for nature seen among the Celtic saints derives from a deep love of God and the future of salvation. He says, “their oft-noted ecological sensitivities

and their celebrated affirmations of nature were, for them, profoundly rooted in their universalizing eschatological and christological convictions” (Santmire 2002, 308). Scholars such as Ó Duinn and Santmire, while supporting certain aspects of modern Celtic Christianity, attempt at the same time to establish the tradition as essentially Christian and avoid any movement toward the denial of a transcendent God or of the divinity of Jesus.

Because God is present within the world, creation is inherently of God and therefore good for modern Celtic Christians. In *One Foot in Eden* (1999b), a book of meditations upon the stages of human life, Newell says, “the basis for this book is the Celtic belief that grace is not opposed to what is natural. Rather grace is given by God to liberate the goodness that has been planted at the heart of life. Grace is opposed to what is false in us but not to what is most deeply natural” (Newell 1999b, 5). Nature and God’s grace are intertwined for Newell, who asserts that “an important feature of Celtic spirituality, that appears again and again in a variety of ways over the centuries, is the refusal to divorce the gift of nature from the gift of grace. Both are seen as of God” (Newell 1999a, 13). God remains accessible and wants to be known. In her work, Esther de Waal explains this experience of “God here and now, with me, close at hand, a God present in life and in work, immediate and accessible” (de Waal 1997, 69). Like the rest of nature, Newell says, “we are created out of the essence of God, not out of nothing” (Newell 1999a, 83). He adds, “it is God's Life that sustains all life, and it is God's Soul that indwells every living soul” (Newell 1999b, 13). Creation, then, is a basically good place where humans may find Divine love and salvation.

For Newell and de Waal, God is radically immanent and accessible within the created world, but also transcendent and necessary for salvation. Newell explains the problem of evil as follows: “the divine likeness within us may be hidden or forgotten. It may be held in terrible bondage by wrongdoing but the image of God remains at the heart of who we are, even though we may live at what seems an infinite distance from it. We have distorted the image but not erased it” (Newell 1999a, 85). Again, the solution to the problem of evil lies in God’s immanence. For Newell, “Eden is not a place from which we are distant in space and time. Rather, it is a dimension within ourselves from which we have become separated” (Newell 2000, 61). We need the grace of God present within the world, though, to realize this essential goodness. While accepting many of the doctrines of Pelagius, Newell avoids what orthodox Christians consider to be the heresy of Pelagianism, by retaining the necessity of God's grace.

Newell and other Celtic Christian writers, such as Timothy Joyce, often oppose this creation-centered theology to the original sin doctrine of St. Augustine. The problems with Augustine began, according to Newell and Joyce, when the Bishop of Hippo actively challenged the creation-centered theology of Pelagius. St. Augustine's dislike for Pelagius, in Newell’s understanding, emerged from Augustine's own personal power designs. Newell claims of Pelagius' excommunication that “the forces which moved against him that year were primarily political in nature” (Newell 1997, 20). Joyce also believes that St. Augustine's work shrouded the essential features of Pelagian theology, as he says, “I believe Pelagius has something to say to us today if we can cut through the extremes to which the Augustinian criticisms may have pushed him” (Joyce 1998, 59). Newell and Joyce note that Pelagianism also differed dramatically from Augustine's

theology, though. For example, Newell argues that Augustine differed with Pelagius's "practice of teaching women to read Scripture and his conviction that in the newborn child the image of God can be seen" (Newell 1997, 13). This summary, of course, paints Augustine in a quite negative and perhaps inaccurate light.

This demonization of St. Augustine is pervasive through the works of many Celtic Christian writers, as Ian Bradley says, "Augustine of Hippo became the bogeyman for a new breed of pro-Celtic theologians who blamed him for giving Western Christianity its obsession with sin and guilt" (Bradley 1999, 202). Other scholars challenge such quick rejections of Augustinian thought, though. For example, in his extensive survey *Traces on the Rhodian Shore* (1967), Clarence Glacken summarizes St. Augustine's ideas as follows: "the earth and earthly things are to be spurned when we compare them with the greater glories of the City of God, but neither are life on earth and the beauties of nature to be despised because they are on a lower order in the scale of being or because they represent an order inferior to the Divine Order. The earth, life on earth, the beauties of nature, are also creations of God" (Glacken 1967, 196). Paul Santmire finds an emerging ecological consciousness in the works of Augustine, saying, "his mature theology represents a flowering of the ecological promise of Christian theology, which later was to be practically expressed in the life of St. Francis" (Santmire 1994, 22). Glacken warns against simplistic readings of early Church writers and imposing modern concerns upon past thinkers, saying, "through selection of materials, the thought of some Church Fathers can be presented so that they appear more ascetic and less tolerant, having less love of life, nature, and learning, so that their thought becomes 'incompatible with any high valuation of nature.' Many expressed both viewpoints; one cannot assume consistency or

that contradictions or differences in emphasis will be reconciled” (Glacken 1967, 202). To some degree, Newell and others apply this unfriendly and perhaps simplistic reading to the works of St. Augustine.

Newell’s creation-centered theology and critiques of original sin, however, are not unique to Celtic Christianity; other theologians mirror Newell’s emphasis upon creation and ecological consciousness. Mark Wallace’s recent work promoting “Christian Paganism” provides one example (Wallace 2005, 13). According to Wallace, Christian Paganism is a “transcendental animist” tradition that understands God as both transcendent and “radically immanent” (Wallace 2005, 43). Wallace calls for recognition of the Holy Spirit as the “green face of God,” or the member of the Trinity most relevant to spiritual orientations toward the world (Wallace 2005, 7), and concludes, “one of the most compelling *religious* responses to the threat of ecocide lies in a recovery of the Holy Spirit as God’s power of life-giving breath who indwells and sustains all life-forms” (Wallace 2005, 38).

Wallace’s Christian Paganism resembles in some ways the immanent creationism of Newell. An important image of the Spirit for Wallace is the “mother bird god,” an image found in Hebrew sources and related to Pagan and Native American conceptions of divinity (Wallace 2005, 40). Recognizing the Spirit in the world helps to create a Christian deep ecology which “envisions all things as bearers of God’s presence through the agency of the Spirit” (Wallace 2005, 97). Like Celtic Christians such as Newell, Wallace seeks to produce a scripturally justifiable and ecologically friendly Christianity.

Matthew Fox’s Creation Spirituality provides another related example of an environmentally friendly Christian theology. Like Newell, Fox calls for a creation-based

spirituality, or “a spirituality that begins with original blessing instead of original sin” (Fox 1994a, 210). For both Fox and Newell, creation is basically good, covered only by the acts of sin, largely because God still inhabits the creation. Fox embraces the pantheism of several mystics, as he says, “it teaches us that everything is in God and God is in everything. That is the proper way to name our relationship with the divine” (Fox 1994a, 212). Fox calls this animating force the Cosmic Christ. Like Celtic Christianity, Creation Spirituality involves engagement for change within the world. For Fox, true Christian environmental and social activism entails an abandonment of duty-based and anthropocentric stewardship ethics and an acceptance of mysticism. He states that “stewardship still denotes a dualistic relationship between humans and creation . . . it is still one species taking upon itself the right to manage another” (Fox 1994b, 64). Such statements against anthropocentrism place Fox on the more radical end of the Christian environmentalist spectrum.

Newell and Fox share a belief in the essential goodness of creation. Fox argues that, because creation is essentially good, evil and any unsavory aspects of creation (like predation) remain crucial parts of God's plan and should be embraced. He says, “the fact is, my friends, all creatures are imperfect—let us celebrate that. Divinity purposefully matched our imperfections with one another, so we need one another and that way we build relationships with one another” (Fox 1994a, 213). The ecological and social crises, though certainly bad and in need of response, represent positive occasions for true spiritual growth and even mystical union with the suffering God, Fox believes. He claims that “today our whole species is involved in the dark night of the soul, but that is not necessarily a bad thing; it can be the beginning of radical conversion, the beginning

of life” (Fox 1994a, 213). Such optimism is also an important part of Newell’s Celtic theology.

While not a Celtic Christian, Fox's theology resembles that of Newell, primarily regarding his creationism and call for engagement with evil forces in the world, and he accepts important points of the Celtic Christian historical story. For example, Fox says, “the creation-centered Celtic people in the seventh century had their nature-mysticism smothered at the Council of Whitby” (Fox 1994a, 210). As with Celtic Christianity, though, several theologians reject and criticize Creation Spirituality as theologically wrong or unorthodox, and question its value with regard to real-world applicability.<sup>1</sup>

Patout Burns argues, for example, that Fox reduces God from transcendent to the cosmos itself, as he says, “by neglecting both the divine transcendence and the distinctiveness of the human, his theory tends to reduce both the divine and the human to the cosmos” (Burns 1994, 82). Paul Santmire, a Lutheran theologian and one of Fox's more vocal critics, claims that Fox's Creation Spirituality neglects important realities of suffering and inequalities in the world. He says, “his approach resonates all too disquietingly with the anti-urban, romantic individualism of the Thoreauvian tradition. When all is said and done Fox leaves us in the sweat lodge. His thought is not fundamentally at home in urban America” (Santmire 2000, 21). Santmire believes that Fox avoids the realities of evil and, by vilifying the theology of St. Augustine, removes a crucial doctrine for truly understanding evil in the world, namely, original sin. He argues that, for struggling people, the doctrine of original sin provides some explanation for their

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<sup>1</sup> Fox’s theology has also alienated him from the Catholic Church. A former Dominican priest, Fox left his order and became an Episcopal priest after pressure from the Vatican regarding his pantheism, denial of original sin, and certain other teachings and activities at his University of Creation Spirituality in Oakland, California. See Kresge 2005 and Introigne 1998.



suffering as well as a way out. For Santmire, mystical approaches to suffering such as Fox's do not feed starving children or help the sick, rather, this "tends to become an occasion for mystical participation in the dark side of the cosmos, rather than an occasion to struggle with alien powers that wreak havoc in this world, come what may" (Santmire 2000, 22). Humans can bring about true social and ecological change, for Santmire, when they have a real evil presence to remove. Ultimately, according to Santmire and Burns, Creation Spirituality fails to provide practical solutions to the real ecological and social crises of the world. This critique might apply just as well to Newell, who also avoids the doctrine of original sin. Arguments concerning whether or not a belief system actually works to solve practical problems, however, require more than just theoretical evidence.

Interestingly, although he criticizes the Creation Spirituality of Matthew Fox, Paul Santmire looks toward the Celtic tradition as a possible source of environmentally-friendly Christian attitudes and practices. For Santmire, the Celtic saints provide examples of Christian spirituality fully in tune with the ecological realities of death and suffering. They are "well-equipped to be our spiritual mentors in this our ecological era preeminently because they can lead us through the valley of the shadow of death" (Santmire 2002, 302). The Celtic monks and saints of the early medieval period did not view nature romantically, "on the contrary, death was their daily bread—and still they embraced nature as the gracious gift of God, their creator and redeemer" (Santmire 2000, 96). These Celtic Christians<sup>2</sup> lived in communion with God, the angels, the saints, and

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<sup>2</sup> Santmire uses the term "Celtic Christian" to refer to persons living "in Ireland, Wales, and Scotland, from about the fifth to the tenth centuries C. E." (Santmire 2000, 96). While he records his own inspiration from these historic Celtic Christians, Santmire does not explicitly address modern Celtic Christian communities.

the spirits of deceased monks (Santmire 2000, 108). Rather than providing examples of romantic and idealistic perceptions of nature, the Celtic saints and monks, for Santmire, provide examples of a religious consciousness fully in tune with the ecological realities of death and predation. The differences between Newell, Fox and Santmire, therefore, reveal the power of Celtic themes and images in the creation of environmentally-friendly Christianity. The Celtic saints are many things to many people, and theological attempts to “green” Christianity referring to their examples deserve further study.

According to Santmire, the reverence for nature seen among the Celtic saints derives from a deep love of God and the future of salvation. Because they recognized the realities of evil and death, the Celtic saints provide meaningful examples for a truly Christian ecology. The debates between Santmire, Fox and Newell, however, focus especially on the possibility that theology might inspire activism. They each seek a theology that works to solve recognized social and ecological problems. It is important now to note some ways in which contemporary Celtic Christians address this issue of real-world function.

### **Modern Communities and Environmental Concern**

The concern for creation often becomes a call for ecological and social justice among modern Celtic Christian writers and organizations. In this section I examine some of the resources drawn upon by believers to support these calls for justice, recognizing that much more empirical data is necessary to draw more definitive conclusions. Some modern communities, such as the Iona Community and *An Charraig*, list environmental and social issues among their most significant concerns, but they do not necessarily represent the beliefs and practices of all Celtic Christian groups and individuals.

For believers, Celtic Christianity remains not Romantic but distinctly concerned with creating a better world. Phillip Newell claims that “those who consider that the Celtic tradition is merely a romanticized nature-mysticism need to hear the hard-hitting words of the Celtic teachers again and again over the centuries. To claim that both nature and grace are gifts of God given for all is to offer a spirituality that engages deeply with the life of the world and that calls emphatically for a just distribution of the earth's resources” (Newell 1999a, 45). Timothy Joyce supports this statement, arguing that “to follow the spiritual worldview of the Celtic Christians is to embrace a way of life that is a real commitment to the belief that the Trinitarian God is alive in this world, that Christ remains incarnate in his church, that each Christian is called to active discipleship in building the kingdom of God” (Joyce 1998, 153-154). While these statements do not explicitly support action for environmental justice, they reveal attempts by popular writers to counter critiques that Celtic Christianity is only disconnected mysticism with no real world applicability. Matthew Fox more explicitly calls for direct action and the acceptance of “ecological virtues,” saying, “political organizing to defend creation, including civil disobedience when necessary, is ecological virtue” (Fox 1994a, 215-215). According to Newell, Joyce and Fox, a spiritual emphasis upon creation necessarily involves a divine call to protect that creation from damaging forces.

The Celtic tradition, according to its supporters, offers a more environmental and socially friendly worldview than more dominant Christian traditions. Reflecting his sense of the repression of the Celtic tradition, Newell asks, “would not the Church and the world have been better prepared to meet the challenges of the modern world—including the ecological crises—if they had learned from Celtic spirituality instead of

rejecting it?” (Newell 1997, 106-107). Though only a suggestion, this comment includes a very strong claim. What makes Celtic Christianity unique, for Newell, is its ability to justly provide solutions to modern social and ecological problems, with the assumption being that other forms of mainstream Christianity have not done so. Celtic Christianity, in Newell’s understanding, provides a necessary Christian alternative to other dominant, oppressive and harmful Christian teachings. Importantly, Newell and others retain important Christian teachings, arguing that their spiritual tradition remains orthodox with other mainstream traditions, though they challenge more traditional and dominant Christian forms for their alleged inability and failures to address ecological and social problems. Celtic Christianity, for Newell, is a spiritual tradition better adapted to face modern challenges from within the Christian context than those traditions more influenced by what he considers to be the world-denying Augustinian example. Examples of community and individual actions make Newell’s claims plausible, but much more research is needed in order to evaluate them definitively.

Many of the modern Celtic Christian groups discussed in Chapter One, such as the Iona Community, emphasize actions for peace and justice. On the official Iona web page, members declare that the community is “committed to rebuilding the common life, through working for social and political change, striving for the renewal of the church with an ecumenical emphasis, and exploring new more inclusive approaches to worship, all based on an integrated understanding of spirituality.”<sup>3</sup> Important issues for the Community include “opposing nuclear weapons, campaigning against the arms trade and for ecological justice . . . political and cultural action to combat racism . . . [and] action

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<sup>3</sup> The Iona Community. “About the Community.” <http://www.iona.org.uk/community/main.htm>. 2003. Last viewed March 16, 2006.

for economic justice, locally, nationally and globally.”<sup>4</sup> Community members sometimes engage in direct actions in response to these issues.

Members of the Iona Community attended demonstrations surrounding the 2005 G8 Summit in Gleneagles, Scotland. On July 2, 2005, the Make Poverty History organization, founded and supported by numerous public figures including Bob Geldoff, Bono and Pat Robertson, led a march around Edinburgh's city center and sponsored a large benefit concert, called Live 8, in London.<sup>5</sup> The movement to Make Poverty History found support among several Christian groups, including a small band of sign-carrying members of the Iona Community.<sup>6</sup>

On July 4, 2005, approximately 700 people gathered to protest Britain's nuclear weapons program at Her Majesty's Naval Base on the Clyde, near Faslane, Scotland. Unlike the Make Poverty History march, this event included the real threat of arrests and potential violence from both “anarchistic agitators” and police (Storrar and Stansfield 2005, 6-7).<sup>7</sup> Included among those present were members and associates of the Iona Community, holding a green sign with a white dove and the words “The Iona Community” and wearing shirts which read “Adomnan of Iona Ploughshares Affinity Group.” The shirts revealed important information about the group’s Celtic Christian identity and relationships with other activist groups. Adomnan was an abbot of Iona and hagiographer of Columba who lived in the latter half of the seventh century. Adomnan

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<sup>4</sup> “About the Community.” <http://www.iona.org.uk/community/main.htm> 2003. Last viewed March 16, 2006.

<sup>5</sup> See [www.makepovertyhistory.org](http://www.makepovertyhistory.org).

<sup>6</sup> Details on events surrounding the G8 Summit come largely from the author's field notes, recorded from July 1 to July 9, 2005.

<sup>7</sup> See [www.faslane.co.nr](http://www.faslane.co.nr) for more about the local peace camp.

also generated a “law of the innocents” doctrine for the kings of Britain which defined the proper treatment of noncombatants in war. For members of the modern Iona Community, Adomnan represents the Celtic Christian tradition of non-violence.

The other half of the t-shirt slogan, “Ploughshares Affinity Group,” refers to the Ploughshares organization. Ploughshares is an international network of Christian anti-war and anti-nuclear activists. In Britain, Trident Ploughshares organizes many protests against England’s Trident Missile Program housed at the Faslane naval base. The Ploughshares network was inspired by the 1980 work of the “Ploughshares Eight,” a group including Jesuit priests Daniel and Philip Berrigan, two famous Catholic anti-war activists who have devoted much of their adult lives to civil disobedience. Daniel Berrigan, for example, stole and publicly burned government draft files in protest of American activities during the Vietnam War.<sup>8</sup> The Berrigans and others also served time in prison after damaging materials related to nuclear warheads at a Pennsylvania munitions factory.<sup>9</sup> By identifying their affinities with the Plowshares network, these individuals revealed some of the links between Celtic Christians and other Christian activist groups. In the afternoon, several of those present, including many of the Iona group and others from a Quaker group, sang hymns and a priest offered a sermon on Jesus’ teachings against violence in front of the main gate of the base.<sup>10</sup> Celtic Christians, or at least those associated with the Iona Community, join other Christian groups such as the Quakers and organizations such as Plowshares in their commitment to nonviolence

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<sup>8</sup> Wikipedia. “Daniel Berrigan.” [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Daniel\\_Berrigan](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Daniel_Berrigan). March 19, 2006. Last viewed March 24, 2006.

<sup>9</sup> See <http://www.plowsharesactions.org/> and <http://www.tridentploughshares.org/index.php3> for more about the Ploughshares network.

<sup>10</sup> Author’s field notes, July 4, 2005.

and activism in support of ecological and social justice.<sup>11</sup> Of course, this does not mean that all self-identifying Celtic Christians engage in similar forms of activism. Some communities, such as the Celtic Christian Communion and the Community of Aidan and Hilda, may approach environmental and social issues primarily by providing education and community outreach programs, while others, such as the members of the “Adomnan of Iona Ploughshares Affinity Group,” may engage in direct action and civil disobedience. More research and fieldwork would be necessary to fully identify the levels of commitment to activism among Celtic Christian individuals and communities.

Some critics, though, question the actual environmental attitudes of medieval Celtic Christians upon which modern groups sometimes base their inspiration. Ian Bradley argues that “it is pretty meaningless to label people living in the eight or ninth century as environmentalists. They lived at a time when there was no perceived, nor probably any significant actual threat to the environment from humans” (Bradley 1998, 59). Excluding Welsh praise poetry dating from as early as the ninth century, Bradley argues that monastic writings reveal no real environmentally friendly attitudes. Thomas O’Loughlin likewise cautions against applying modern concerns to medieval peoples, saying, “when any early medieval text feels warm and cosy to our religious sensibilities, then we should watch out” (O’Loughlin 2000, 31). Bradley also argues that any avoidance of exploitation of natural resources among the Celtic monks derived more from their simple monastic lifestyles than from any ‘green’ theological perspective. As he put it, “their

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<sup>11</sup> In my own research I have encountered a few interesting connections between Quakers and Celtic Christians. During research with the Gainesville Friends Meeting, several of my interviewees expressed interest in Celtic themes of Christian spirituality, though none identified themselves as Celtic Christians. Alastair McIntosh also combines the two traditions well. A Quaker activist and scholar from the Isle of Lewis in western Scotland, McIntosh blends the Quaker call for justice and peace with inspiration from his own Celtic culture. See McIntosh 2001.

extreme austerity and asceticism almost certainly did more to preserve the natural environment around the monastic *vallum*” than any of their ideas about the sanctity of creation (Bradley 1998, 67). Philip Sheldrake, a supporter of the modern Celtic Christian resurgence, also warns against misapplying environmentally friendly ideas and behaviors to medieval monks. He argues, “neither the Irish Celtic hermits of the eighth century nor the nineteenth-century Hebridean islanders of Carmichael’s collections were concerned *about* nature in our modern sense. . . . In contrast the Celts, whom we tend to romanticize, simply *lived with* nature because they existed in constant contact with it and could not afford to be disrespectful to it” (Sheldrake 1995, 71). The important point, though, remains that the works and teachings of medieval Celtic Christians, idealized though they may be in the present, inspire modern activity.

In their critiques of modern Celtic Christianity, scholars such as Bradley, O’Loughlin, and Meek point to historical inaccuracies and issues of improper cultural appropriations. Chapter 2 examined the historical development of Celtic Christianity and several of the related historical claims on both sides. This chapter examined several of the important theological claims and practices of modern Celtic Christians and critical responses to them. Religious studies scholars need not become partisans in theological disputes, but they can examine the contested nature and impacts of such disputes. Moreover, they can draw on theories related to new religious movements, paganism and nature religion, to understand Celtic Christianity as an example of the general process of new religious formation. Because Celtic Christianity, or at least as represented by its chief writers, brings to the center of its theology and practice issues of social and



ecological justice, its emergence and growth may reveal important trends for the future of religious change.

CHAPTER 4  
CELTIC CHRISTIANITY AND NEW RELIGIONS: A RELIGIOUS STUDIES  
ANALYSIS

Many of the historical claims made by popular writers on Celtic Christianity find little archaeological, literary or linguistic support. As Chapter 3 revealed, however, Celtic Christianity remains a functional spiritual orientation for many adherents. Rather than simply accepting the claims of the critics or the believers, religious studies scholars have begun to take a different approach to such revised religions, analyzing them as new or emergent religions, and not criticizing them for inventing their traditions or distorting those from which they draw inspiration. This chapter employs David Chidester's (1988) model of religious studies along with theories of new religious movements and nature religion to gain a better understanding of Celtic Christianity from a religious studies perspective. While Celtic Christianity may not without complication be considered a new religious movement, theories regarding the social functions of new and alternative religions nonetheless help to situate Celtic Christianity as a new and emerging tradition worthy of further study. As a new religious tradition that values nature, Celtic Christianity shares certain historical and ideological features with nature-based pagan and New Age religions as well. This relationship can be illuminated through the lens of Catherine Albanese's "nature religion." Utilizing this religious studies model allows for a fuller picture of Celtic Christianity, without normative evaluations, and helps place it within more general trends of religious production and countercultural *bricolage* (Lévi-Strauss 1967, 18; Taylor 2001a, 178).

### **Celtic Christianity and New Religious Movements**

Scholarship on new religious movements shows that all religions exist in states of reformation and revision. Celtic Christianity, then, may be seen as a new religious revision of more traditional Christian beliefs and practices based in specific contexts and needs. New religious movement theorists, primarily Colin Campbell, show how new religions emerge from countercultural social trends and then define themselves as alternatives to dominant social norms. This section examines these arguments more closely.

Definitions of the term “new religious movement” often remain ambiguous and tend to identify types instead of providing any common features. The term itself comes from the study of cults. Scholars of cultic behavior sought more neutral terminology after it became evident that the term “cult,” in popular usage, carried the negative connotation of violent, brain-washing groups such as the Manson Family and Jim Jones' People's Temple. Many scholars now argue for the abandonment of the term “cult” altogether, as James Richardson says, “to make any use of the term 'cult' offers solace to those promoting the new, negatively-loaded definition of the term, and such use should be stopped” (Richards 1998, 37). One still finds the term “cult” used in older new religious movement literature, however.

Perhaps one of the more influential typologies of religious groups comes from J. Gordon Melton. In his *Encyclopedia of American Religions* (2003), Melton divides historical and contemporary American religious groups into twenty-four categories or “families”, most involving some form of Christianity. A central and innovative aspect of Melton's typology, though, is the acceptance of non-mainstream traditions. Along with the Baptist Family and the Lutheran Family, Melton acknowledges the Pentecostal

Family, the Christian Science-Metaphysical Family and the Mormon Family. Celtic Christianity, though, occupies no single place in Melton's typology, but several places. Different aspects of it could place it within the Liberal Family (which includes Unitarians and Universalists), the Spiritualist, Psychic and New Age Family (including Spiritualism), the Ancient Wisdom Family (including Theosophy), and the Magick Family (including forms of paganism). As Chapter 2 revealed, elements of modern Celtic Christianity derive historically from each of these families. Melton himself places some modern Celtic Christian churches within the Ancient Wisdom Family, perhaps because of their claims regarding the continued tradition from pre-Christian times (Melton 2003, 163). Clearly, this typology does not efficiently place Celtic Christianity. Melton accounts for such groups with the Unclassifiable Family, into which fall syncretistic and other groups. Though his typology represents a positive scholarly move toward the acceptance of new and alternative traditions as genuine religions worth scholarly study in their own right, and while it helps to some degree to situate Celtic Christianity within the American context, Melton's Families do not describe well the general Celtic Christianity movement (Melton 2003; Saliba 2003, 24-32).

Along with listing types of new religions, many definitions refer to the social situation of new religions. For example, after listing several examples of new religions, Catherine Wessinger explains their function, saying, "new religions provide social spaces for experimentation in alternative theologies, gender roles, sexual relations, leaderships structures, and group organizations" (Wessinger 2005, 6514). J. Gordon Melton likewise prefers to emphasize social relationships in defining new religious movements. He says, "new religions are thus primarily defined not by any characteristic(s) that they share, but

by the tension in their relationships with the other forms of religious life represented by the dominant churches, the ethnic religions, and the sects. They are all those groups designated in some measure as unacceptable by the dominant churches, with some level of concurrence by the ethnic churches and sectarian groups” (Melton 2004, 81). For Melton, new religions must exist in some tension with more traditional ways of life and belief. A major claim of modern Celtic Christians is that their tradition has been marginalized by mainstream Roman Catholicism and world-denying Protestant groups. So, according to the popular insider understanding of Celtic Christianity, the movement occupies Melton’s countercultural space. This new religious counterculture may be better understood through Colin Campbell’s work on the “cultic milieu.”

Studying cults in the 1960's and 70's, sociologist Colin Campbell formulated his theory of the cultic milieu. Working with Ernst Troeltsch's typology of religious organizations, Campbell noticed that many cult groups<sup>1</sup> emerged and disintegrated frequently. While individual groups often failed, Campbell believed that a certain supportive milieu, keeping the production alive, must have existed. He said, “there is a continual process of cult formation and collapse which parallels the high turnover of membership at the individual level. Clearly, therefore, cults must exist within a milieu which, if not conducive to the maintenance of individual cults, is clearly highly conducive to the spawning of cults in general” (Campbell 2002, 14). This cultic milieu remained a countercultural feature of society, as he argued, “thus, whereas cults are by definition a largely transitory phenomenon, the cultic milieu is, by contrast, a constant

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<sup>1</sup> Campbell meant by “cult” basically what scholars mean by new religious movement today, operating from what Richardson (1998) calls the “sociological-technical” definition instead of the “popular-negative.” In other words, “cult” held no negative connotation for Campbell but neutrally and effectively described observable social orientations.

feature of society” (Campbell 2002, 14). The cultic milieu exists as a continuous alternative ferment for heterodox beliefs and practices. While Campbell’s cultic milieu fails to adequately account for tensions within and among countercultural groups (Taylor 2001, 178) it does explain the general, amorphous body of countercultural beliefs and practices which dialogically shapes much new religious production. Celtic Christianity, which draws from pagan, New Age, alternative Christian, and environmental activist cultures, fits within and continues to draw from this cultic milieu.

The emergence of the cultic milieu, for Campbell, is directly related to the increasing secularization of society. He argues, “the decline in the power and influence of the Christian churches has inevitably weakened their role as custodians of 'truth' and reduced the extent to which they can draw upon society for forays against indigenous 'pagans' and 'heretics'” (Campbell 2002, 20). The decline in power of traditional religious institutions as well as increasing pluralism and syncretism add to the general acceptance of the cultic milieu, as Campbell says, “the relativism and tolerance of cultural pluralism which, it is claimed, are concomitants of secularization have greatly assisted the increased acceptability of these 'heretical' beliefs” (Campbell 2002, 21). The cultic milieu existed in eras of more extreme centralized Church authority, in Western cultures, but it only emerged into the mainstream when the Church lost its authority through the secularizing tendencies of industrialization and modernity. Campbell’s argument is somewhat affirmed by noting that the rationalistic Enlightenment of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and the scientific industrial modernization of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries correspond with the development of many alternative religions.

Campbell used witchcraft in Britain as an example of the general emergence of the cultic milieu during a period of secularization. According to Campbell, decreasing church power and increasing tolerance made possible the emergence of new witchcraft traditions such as Wicca, even in a place where, only a few hundred years earlier, witches accused of heresy were often executed. Importantly for Campbell, along with decreasing church power and increasing tolerance, secularization includes the acceptance of scientific rationalism. This does not, however, produce secularism. For Campbell, the incompatibility of science and religion exists primarily in philosophical and theoretical understandings of the terms, as he says, “although such an incompatibility can be demonstrated at a philosophical level, it is by no means clear that the scientific and religious outlooks are behaviorally incongruous” (Campbell 2002, 21). Rather than replacing churches as a dogmatic force of conformity, Campbell argues that increasing scientific rationalism cannot suppress the cultic milieu, “for it is to be doubted whether science as a body can compare with the churches in either their desire or their ability to repress heterodox views in the society at large” (Campbell 2002, 22). Importantly, Campbell wrote this long before the explosion in access to the Internet, which added further support to his argument and seemed to defy many cultural regulations from churches, scientists, or others.

Like Melton, Campbell defines the cult (or new religious movement) against the social and religious norms of the dominant society. If new religious movements must always remain countercultural, however, how might they gain legitimacy? Massimo Introvigne argues that individual countercultural movements enter the mainstream over time, but antipathy remains among members of the mainstream culture toward the cultic

milieu in general. He says of popular media claims of brainwashing levied against new religious movements, “it will remain as a psycho-cultural artifact, capable of limiting the expansion of minorities perceived as part of a marginal fringe, or as kitsch. As such, the fringe will not really over-expand, much less 'explode', although individual movements may move from the fringe to the mainline, as Christianity did once and as groups such as the Pentecostals or the Mormons are doing now” (Introvigne 2004, 989). Ideas of acceptability shift over time in cultures, particularly in Campbell's secularized age without the institutional authority of churches. Definitive aspects of the counterculture change as alternative movements, like Mormonism and Pentecostalism, gain adherents and move into the mainstream. The cultic milieu, though, remains as a source of and safe haven for countercultural ideas. Using Campbell's terms, Celtic Christianity may be understood as a Christian movement heavily influenced by environmentalist and pagan currents of the cultic milieu.

It is important to note, however, that Colin Campbell questions functionalist definitions of new religious movements, or those in which “the rise of new religious movements is presented as revealing something significant about the nature of contemporary society” such as the inability of major religions to satisfy spiritual needs any longer (Campbell 1982, 232). This functionalist argument for the increasing popularity of new religious movements assumes that people move to them out of dissatisfaction with older traditions. Campbell argues that this functionalist position leaves a gap in satisfaction of needs among religious persons. In other words, according to the functionalist argument, individuals feel unsatisfied for some period of time before finding satisfactory elements within the cultic milieu. Instead, Campbell argues that “the



decline of the churches may, however, be seen as a necessary rather than a sufficient condition for the growth of cults” (Campbell 1982, 235). In this view, people did not leave major religions to join new religious movements. Instead, the decline in the power of the major religions removed the earlier barriers to the spread of heterodox beliefs.

According to Campbell, it is not that specific teachings of new religious movements suddenly appeal to people, drawing them away from their traditional religions, but rather that, with the diminishing authority of religious structures, individuals become more aware of the ever-present cultic milieu in ways that they never could before. Campbell says, “there has been a major shift in recent decades, not so much from belief to unbelief as from belief to seekership. That is, away from any commitment to doctrine and dogma towards a high valuation of individual intellectual growth and the pursuit for truth coupled with a preparedness to believe in almost any alternative or occult teaching” (Campbell 1982, 237). This movement away from doctrine and an increasing valuation of the individual correspond with the rationalism of secularization. Campbell warns against assuming that new religious movements arise to fulfill a societal need. For him, new religious movements always exist as part of the vague cultic milieu of ideas and practices. Only when Church structures lose their authority do elements of the cultic milieu emerge into general society, gaining popularity as more people gain knowledge of their existence.

In the American context, though, this loss of authority does not correspond to a loss of religious devotion. Christianity remains a powerful force in American society, but the increasing diversity of denominations opens the door for a public acceptance of more general diversity in religion. Individuals, however, may select elements within the cultic

milieu most applicable to their own needs. The cultic milieu, for Campbell, includes many diverse elements—environmentalist, New Age, pagan, racist, communal, to name a few. What elements gain popularity following the decline in centralized religious power is determined by which element responds to the awareness and needs of a society.

Campbell's argument against purely functional understandings of the cultic milieu just warns against assuming that this availability of choices precedes the popular emergence of the cultic milieu.

So, more people become aware of the cultic milieu as it gains exposure due to the withdrawal of traditional religious authorities. Though it contains diverse and perhaps contradictory elements, individuals chose aspects of the cultic milieu most appropriate to their own needs and current religious perceptions. Philip Sheldrake summarizes the appeal of Celtic Christianity in the modern Western world as follows: "there is a serious dissatisfaction with the institutional Church. This is leading an increasing number of people to seek in the past a version of Christianity that seems to be free from all that they find unattractive about the Church's present institutional forms . . . the importance of pilgrimage and journey in the Celtic tradition, balanced with a strong sense of place, are sentiments that aver very much in tune with the experience and temper of our own age. We seek both firm roots and yet a capacity to deal with continuous change" (Sheldrake 1995, 2-3). For Sheldrake, Celtic Christianity offers mechanisms for establishing cultural and spiritual roots while at the same time acknowledging the need for change. His summation, while addressing the novel aspects of the modern movement, presents Celtic Christianity as a purely Christian tradition. Though many Celtic Christians consider themselves orthodox Christians, popular presentations of the tradition are often

influenced by other New Age and pagan sources. Celtic Christianity, then, involves the acceptance of pagan, New Age and environmentalist themes within a Christian context. Because it draws upon several elements of the cultic milieu to satisfy needs left unsatisfied by mainstream Christianity, Celtic Christianity represents a Christian new religious movement.

Some, though, might reject the application of the term “new religious movement” to Celtic Christianity. Unlike generally recognized new religious movements like Scientology and Mormonism, Celtic Christianity makes few if any novel religious claims. As shown in chapters One and Two, many of the main theological and historical claims of Celtic Christians have been made by others who do not associate themselves with the tradition. Celtic Christianity, then, might represent more an emerging Christian spiritual orientation, or what Massimo Introvigne calls “non-traditional Christianity,” than a new religious movement in itself (Introvigne 1998, 259). Celtic Christianity is still enmeshed within processes of religious production, however, and historically associated with the countercultural and romantic cultic milieu which has spawned many new religious forms. By challenging the anti-ecological aspects of dominant forms of Christianity, Celtic Christianity exists within this alternative milieu and represents an innovative approach to Christianity. It mediates between traditional and alternative belief systems, accepting the historical accounts of certain New Age, pagan and environmentalist groups while at the same time retaining belief in a transcendent Christian God. If, as Eileen Barker argues, new religions may be new interpretations of traditional religious doctrines, then Celtic Christianity certainly counts as a new religious movement (Barker 1998, 18).

Theories of new religious movements help explain the social context for the development and acceptance of Celtic Christianity. It remains to be seen, though, how Celtic Christianity relates to other elements of this cultic milieu, specifically, paganism.

### **Celtic Christianity and Paganism**

Celtic Christianity reflects the increasing creation and acceptance of new religious movements based on the valuation of nature. It exists within a milieu of new religious formation, much of which is elucidated by new religious movement theory. Like certain forms of modern paganism, it emerges out of environmentalist and pagan streams within what Campbell called the cultic milieu. A further analysis of scholarship regarding nature-based paganism will help to situate Celtic Christianity within this milieu of new religious formation.

Perhaps one of the most important and influential scholars of paganism in recent years has been Michael York. In *Pagan Theology* (2003), he attempted to establish paganism as a legitimate religious system: “paganism represents a theological perspective and consequent practice that, despite its plethora of micro and local expressions, is a viable and distinguishable religiospiritual position” (York 2003, 14). Paganism for York is a “root religion,” or “the root from which the tree of all religions grows” (York 2003, 167). As a root religion, the study of paganism reveals valuable information regarding other religious formations, including Celtic Christianity.

Nature remains central to definitions of paganism. For York, “the earth and nature constitute the seminal and unifying sacred text for the various localized expressions of what can be identified as pagan religions” (York 2003, 16). Graham Harvey follows York's emphasis upon nature, saying, “paganism labels a set of religions centered on the celebration and veneration of nature that understand and engage it in one way or another

as sacred” (Harvey 2005a, 1247). More succinctly, Harvey says, “paganism is a polytheistic Nature religion” (Harvey 1997, 1). Occasionally, scholars seem to use the terms pagan and Neopagan interchangeably. Following York, however, “paganism” is a general term encompassing most earth-based religions while “Neopaganism” refers to a set of specific, modern Western-based pagan religions such as Wicca, Asatru, Odinism, Druidism and others (York 2003, 60). Modern Celtic spirituality (not Christianity) is generally Neopagan. Celtic Christianity, continuing with York's distinction, is a form of Christianity more in tune with its nature-based pagan roots.

Paganism is frequently defined in relation to New Age religions. York argues that religions fit on a continuum with paganism and gnosticism occupying each end and where, ideally, “paganism posits the world or matter as real and valuable, while gnosticism sees the same as something to be penetrated, as something fictive or worthless or even evil” (York 2003, 159). This distinction between materialist worldliness and immaterialist other-worldliness exists in several other scholarly understandings of pagan and New Age religions. For Sarah Pike, the distinction between the New Age and paganism involves a temporal focus, where “New Agers tend to look toward the future, when a new age of expanded consciousness will dawn, while Neopagans look to the past for inspiration in order to revive old religions and improve life in the present,” though in American they both derive from the same precursor traditions (Pike 2004, 34). Adrian Ivakhiv, on the other hand, argues for a spatial distinction between “ecospirituality,” which values embodiment and an imminent divinity, and “ascensionism,” which focuses upon otherworldly realms of consciousness and awakening. Like Pike, Ivakhiv believes that ecospirituality and ascensionism share similar historical origins and social

orientations, as he says, “one seeks to rekindle the connection with Earth's power directly, while the other looks for wisdom beyond our planet's weakened frame, but both aim to challenge, largely through spiritual means, the status quo of late modernity” (Ivakhiv 2001, 8). In other words, they both derive from the countercultural cultic milieu and serve as responses to dominant cultural and social trends.

Bron Taylor also notes a continuum within nature-based spiritualities. This continuum includes “supernaturalistic” and “non-supernaturalistic nature spiritualities” with added elements of cosmological or earthly focus (Taylor 2001b, 238). Traditions may be supernaturalistic-cosmological (many New Age traditions), non-supernaturalistic-earthly (scientific spiritualities such as some forms of Gaia theory), or any other combination of these four elements (Taylor 2001b, 239). Taylor notes that tensions exist among different parties, but that they generally agree upon the sacredness of the earth and the necessity of proper action toward the earth’s preservation (Taylor 2001b, 238).

The creationism of Celtic Christianity and perceived connections with the past place it on the ecospirituality or Neopagan side of the alternative religious spectrum, while the retention of a transcendent God and the wisdom of disembodied saints represent more ascensionist or New Age traits. Clearly, Celtic Christianity is not a perfect example of either type. In Taylor’s continuum, Celtic Christianity finds a more specific place between supernaturalistic-cosmological and supernaturalistic-earthly nature spiritualities. Celtic Christianity is an emerging ecospirituality, or nature spirituality, based in both worldly pagan and ascensionist Christian beliefs and practices. Like Lévi-Strauss’s *bricoleur*, Celtic Christians construct their tradition from the diverse cultural and religious elements available. Lévi-Strauss employed the term *bricolage* as an

analogy to explain the creative incorporation of diverse cultural elements into the mythical thought of so-called primitive peoples during the construction of social structures from observed events (Lévi-Strauss 1967, 18-22). The methods of the *bricoleur*, for Lévi-Strauss, existed in contrast to the methods of the scientific engineer. While the engineer applied a structured system (science) to the world in order to understand its parts, the *bricoleur* pragmatically utilized all available elements to construct the structures. The Western scientific worldview, for Lévi-Strauss, operated like the engineer while traditional cultures operated like the *bricoleur*, though he argued neither approach was in any way “better” than the other (Lévi-Strauss 1967, 22). In the context of religious studies, *bricolage* may refer to the adoption of different beliefs and practices into single tradition. Taylor explains *bricolage* as the “amalgamations of many bits and pieces of diverse cultural systems,” and believes that the term “captures better the reciprocal and ever-evolving processes of religious production” (Taylor 2001a, 178). Celtic Christianity is part of this reciprocal process of nature-based religious production, and further study could potentially provide valuable information concerning the interactions between religions and nature.

### **Celtic Christianity and Nature Religion**

Catherine Albanese’s “nature religion” also helps understand the place of nature within Celtic Christianity and the diverse interactions between cultures, religions and nature. In *Nature Religion in America: From the Algonkian Indians to the New Age* (1990) and *Reconsidering Nature Religion* (2002), Albanese examines some of the diverse ways in which nature-focused religions in America draw on and manipulate nature. For Albanese, nature religion is a system of orientations based in nature or natural themes, or a term for all religious phenomena in which nature is an important

symbol or conceptual resource, whether or not the individuals involved actually consider nature to be sacred (Albanese 1990, 6-7). Elsewhere, she says that the term “the natural dimension of religion,” remains somewhat more appropriate and accurate than “nature religion,” meaning that it is more an element of religious life than a specific belief system in itself (Albanese 1990, 13). Albanese argues that focusing on nature religion has value because it reveals important beliefs and practices that are often ignored in American religious history, but that have great power both for individuals and their societies. She says, “it is—given the right places to look—everywhere apparent. But it is also a form of religion that slips between the cracks of the usual interpretive grids—or that, more slippery still, evades and circumvents adventurous ways to name it” (Albanese 1990, 199). According to Albanese, “nature religion” is a vague but nonetheless meaningful term.

Albanese cites numerous examples including of American nature religion the Transcendentalists, represented by Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau, the 19<sup>th</sup> century popular fictional stories of Davy Crockett, the wilderness writings of John Muir, and several 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century natural health and New Age movements including Spiritualism and Theosophy, to name just a few. In Albanese's understanding, each of these examples represents a specific orientation toward the natural world based in certain value and meaning systems, so they each help constitute American nature religion. Importantly, though Albanese discusses nature religion in the American context, it may still include international features, such as the arrival of the macrobiotic movement from Japan (Albanese 1990, 190). Celtic Christianity, likewise, is a movement that crosses borders. Though based in the history and mythology of Britain and Ireland, Celtic



Christianity is very much associated with “roots” and frequently appeals to persons in North America and Australia with Celtic or hoped-for Celtic roots. Therefore, even Albanese's discussion of nature religion in the American context remains meaningful for the study of Celtic Christianity.

American nature religion, though, involves both positive and negative aspects. Albanese argues, “nature religion, as an idea and phenomenon, reiterates democratic values, to be sure, by acknowledging the essential similarity and equality of human experience embedded in the reality that constitutes nature. But it also acknowledges forces and factors that delimit the human project—aspects of life over which humans, literally, have no control and before which they must bow” (Albanese 2002, 24). Albanese also argues that although it is commonly thought to promote social and ecological wellbeing, American nature religion often masks an impulse to dominate nature as well as other people. She states, “the impulse to dominate was, in fact, everywhere in nature religion” (Albanese 1990, 12). She cites the work of Thomas Jefferson as an example of this domination and patriotic imperialism, saying, “nature religion meant communion with forces that enlarged the public life of the nation. And with Jefferson and other American patriots always on top, it meant conquest to insure that nature's forces would flow as the lifeblood of the body politic” (Albanese 1990, 70). Notions of harmony and the rural ideal, for Albanese, masked or intentionally supported the domination of America's Native peoples. In many ways this resembles the arguments of Meek and Bradley concerning the domination inherent in modern Celtic Christianity.

“Nature religion” is a scholarly lens through which to interpret religious orientations toward and understandings of nature. Recently, some scholars have

attempted to utilize nature religion as a tool for reevaluating definitions of religion. Barbara Davy argues, for example, that “Albanese’s idea of nature religion can help make visible practices in popular culture and political activity of all religions as religious expressions, and thus broaden the understanding of religion beyond its most identifiable institutional expressions, and help religionists more easily to understand religious activities that do not easily correspond to categories of study derived from religious institutions like churches and scriptures” (Davy 2005, 1173). Davy continues, arguing that nature religion does not exactly mean “nature religions,” or simply religions with special veneration for nature. Instead, nature religion is a theme found in numerous religious and apparently non-religious expressions. Davy says, “nature religion is not opposite to the religions of history or of ethics, but is a type of religion that can be found within the practices of Christianity and other mainstream religions as well as marginal traditions” (Davy 2005, 1174). For Davy and others, nature religion becomes a tool to interpret religion in general. Scholars need not emphasize only the issues of power and domination in nature religion but examine all aspects of its operation without taking sides on what is right or wrong. Such an approach provides a clearer picture of multiple exchanges and interactions involved in normal religious development and change.

### **Celtic Christianity as Modern Nature Spirituality**

Celtic Christianity, then, may be seen as an example of contemporary nature spirituality, to use Taylor’s term (2001b, 238). Employing Chidester’s (1988) model of religious studies and other interpretive tools such as nature religion and new religious movement theory helps provide a more complete picture of Celtic Christianity as modern nature spirituality worthy of consideration among religionists. Analyzing Celtic Christianity in this light reveals important information regarding popular attempts to

“green” Christianity from within the tradition itself and can aid the further study of the interactions between religions and nature, particularly in a time of the increasing popular awareness of ecological crises.

The example of Celtic Christianity might reveal the increasing importance of religious solutions to current ecological and social crises. Adrian Ivakhiv says, “as large numbers of people perceive society to be in the midst of a thoroughgoing crisis, an ecological, cultural, spiritual, and political crisis of an unprecedentedly global scale, attempts are made to reconceive the myths or master stories of society to respond to this crisis” (Ivakhiv 2001, 5). Modern Celtic Christianity represents just this type of reconception. Ian Bradley, a critic of Celtic Christianity, nonetheless accepts the ecological and social values of the popular tradition, “if we are to chase Celtic dreams, and history suggests that we always will, better surely that they be about unpolluted waters and intact ozone layers than about having bigger and better relics than the church down the road” (Bradley 1999, 232). Celtic Christianity represents a way for its believers to deal religiously with real social and ecological crises. The popular texts analyzed in this thesis provide one form of evidence regarding Celtic Christian perceptions of nature and the active role of humans within it. More field work would be needed to fully explore Celtic Christian values in practice.

Much of the scholarly analysis of Celtic Christianity, such as Meek’s work, focuses mainly upon issues of inaccuracy, secular individualism, and improper cultural appropriation. As this thesis has argued, however, historically inaccurate claims constitute only part of the foundation of modern Celtic Christian belief. There is an important practical and functional side as well. As Alastair McIntosh argues, “the issue, I

think, is not *whether* Celtic spirituality ever existed, but the fact that a living spirituality connecting soil, soul and society manifestly can and does exist” (McIntosh 2001, 19).

Marion Bowman similarly says of the Celtic revival in Britain, “that New Age knowledge about the Celts and Druids is not always based on research acceptable to academic historians, archaeologists, literary scholars or Celticists is not the point. What is important is that this received wisdom has become a part of the religious map of Britain today. Some may despair of it, but students of religion would be well advised to note its growth and potency” (Bowman 1993, 155). This statement applies just as well to the modern, international Celtic Christianity movement. The academic historians and others mentioned by Bowman provide only part of the story on Celtic Christianity. It is a real spiritual orientation for many people and, if we study it as such, can perhaps inform us about the role of religion in modern societies.

This argument essentially follows David Chidester’s call for further religious studies analysis of issues of religious appropriation. For Chidester, religion is, among other things, “that dimension of culture involving the stealing back and forth of sacred symbols” (Chidester 1988, 157). Chidester uses the term “stealing” as a “shorthand designation for complex negotiations over the ownership of symbols” (Chidester 1988, 157). Chidester agrees with Geertz that religion is a system of symbols, but adds that different parties claim ownership over these symbols as well (Chidester 1988, 157). In his analysis of popular Christian reactions to the Unification Church and the Peoples Temple, Chidester argues that symbols remain contested by both mainstream and alternative traditions, and that all interested parties engage in competing claims of ownership over sacred symbols and the related right to designate what counts as orthodox

belief. For Chidester, many of those who criticize religious appropriations do so from places of power and out of needs to preserve the authority of specific interpretations. Referring to American perceptions of the Unification Church and the Peoples Temple, Chidester argues that “perceptions of danger, therefore, arise not only through anxieties over defilement, but also by way of perceived threats to the personal or collective ownership of central symbols by forces on the periphery” (Chidester 1988, 139). This might apply to certain critics of Celtic Christianity as well. For people who believe that Christianity needs no changes to deal with modern problems, the claims of Celtic Christians would certainly be unwelcome.

The role of the religious studies scholar, in Chidester’s understanding, is not to take one side or the other in this process but to recognize the multiple and competing claims of ownership. In situations of contested ownership, “dialectics of appropriation and alienation” appear (Chidester 1988, 158). In other words, groups alternately claim ownership of symbols and alienate those other groups which contest that ownership. When scholars take the side that one group should or should not appropriate symbols, they perhaps unwittingly enter into this dialectic as well. Instead, Chidester offers the “availability of symbols” mode of engagement with issues of cultural appropriation. In this scholarly mode of engagement, “while appropriation and alienation operate on the battlefield of symbols, religious studies opens up a demilitarized zone for the academic investigation of the underlying patterns and processes of religion” (Chidester 1988, 158). This does not mean that religious symbols belong to all or that appropriations do not occasionally have damaging effects. Instead, it is a method of objectively deconstructing claims of ownership and perhaps gaining a clearer understanding of religious and cultural

processes (Chidester 1988, 159). He concludes, “by exploring the morphology and history of the sacred, the academic study of religion reveals the ways in which religious persons, religious communities, and religious traditions themselves, are ‘owned,’ shaped and conditioned by the patterns and processes of the sacred” (Chidester 1988, 159). Applying this approach to Celtic Christianity reveals a new tradition equally engaged in battles over the ownership of symbols.

As examined in Chapters 2 and 3, Donald Meek and others criticize Celtic Christianity for the domination inherent in the cultural appropriations involved in the formation of the tradition. Employing Chidester’s “availability of symbols” mode of engagement, though, shows that scholars may move beyond critiques like those of Meek into a deeper analysis of the ways in which Celtic Christianity works “on the ground,” or how adherents apply their beliefs in their daily lives. We need not defend or condemn the claims and actions of Celtic Christians. Instead, to recognize the processes involved in the development and continuation of Celtic Christianity and to situate the tradition within broader trends is enough. Applying the approaches of new religious movement and nature religion theory, Celtic Christianity may be categorized as a specifically Christian modern nature spirituality (Taylor 2001b). As a nature spirituality, Celtic Christianity is included within a greater trend toward nature-venerating religious traditions, or those which offer religious solutions to recognized environmental crises, including forms of paganism, the New Age, environmental activism, other ecotheologies.

Scholars of religion may add important elements to the study of Celtic Christianity, and new religious formations in general, by analyzing Celtic Christianity as a functioning spiritual tradition and belief system for many persons alive today. With its call for the

protection of the earth and social justice, Celtic Christianity might well serve a positive social function and help people deal effectively with very real present day crises. If the ecological and social crises worsen, and if it is true that people frequently confront these issues religiously, then it is possible that nature-based new spiritual traditions like Celtic Christianity will only grow in popularity. If beliefs translate into practices, then such traditions may also provide needed solutions to these crises.

## CHAPTER 5 CONCLUSION

In his now famous 1967 article “The Historic Roots of our Ecologic Crisis,” Lynn White, Jr. identified the Christian dichotomy between humanity and nature as largely responsible for the rampant abuse of resources and ecological destruction found from the medieval period in Europe to the present. His article also included, though, a proscriptive element sometimes overlooked by his critics. He said, “we shall continue to have a worsening ecologic crisis until we reject the Christian axiom that nature has no reason for existence save to serve man” (White 2003, 36). For White, this did not mean a full rejection of Christianity. He cited the examples of Eastern Orthodox traditions and St. Francis as potential sources for environmentally friendly Christianity. He might have cited Celtic Christianity as well.

To summarize the key points in this thesis, Celtic Christianity is a relatively new Christian spiritual development based in the broader milieu of Celtic spirituality, which includes pagan and New Age traditions as well. Popular writers on Celtic Christianity connect their tradition to older beliefs and practices in the Celtic regions of Ireland, Scotland and Wales. For writers such as Philip Newell, Timothy Joyce, Seán Ó Duinn, Philip Sheldrake and others, early Christians in Celtic lands retained certain pagan practices and worldviews while blending them, in a fully orthodox manner, with Christianity. Many modern Celtic Christians argue that the revived Celtic traditions offer important insights and useful perspectives, including responses to ecological and social crises, suited to the needs of persons around the world today. In other words, Celtic



Christianity counters White's anthropocentric Christian axiom and offers a more inclusive and environmentally friendly Christian alternative.

Historical examination of Christianity in Celtic lands, though, does not support all of the claims of popular writers such as Newell and Joyce. For example, as Ian Bradley shows (1998), little evidence exists for intentional environmentally friendly behaviors among Irish monastic communities. This leads some, such as Donald Meek and Bradley, to question the usefulness of Celtic Christianity and even the motives of some of the tradition's promoters. For Meek, many who popularize Celtic Christianity engage in damaging cultural appropriation, either intentionally or unintentionally. Modern Celtic Christian claims, Meek argues, simplify, idealize and romanticize Celtic history and primitivize modern Celtic peoples. Celtic spirituality, he continues, is not so much a feature of Celtic peoples as a created tradition applied to the people of Ireland, Scotland and Wales by outsiders. The appropriation, creation, and popularization of Celtic themes, according to some scholars, represent the continued cultural domination of certain powerful groups over the marginalized. For scholars such as Meek and Bradley, the easy marketability of Celtic spirituality, including Celtic Christianity, shows that it is basically a creation of wealthy, dominant cultures (American and British) and part of the general trend in the modern, secularized world, toward individualistic, syncretistic, and materialist spiritualities. Debates such as these surrounding the legitimacy of the tradition occupy much of the scholarly literature devoted to Celtic Christianity.

Religious studies, though, offers a different approach to Celtic Christianity. Rather than taking sides on the issue of appropriation and domination, the religious studies perspective (or what Chidester calls the "availability of symbols mode of engagement")

[Chidester 1988, 158]) understands that all religions exist in constant states of change and conflict surrounding the ownership of sacred symbols. This perspective allows the scholar to analyze more objectively all power interests involved in religious production and to situate individual traditions within broader trends of religious belief and development. While this position does not ignore the real possibility of culturally damaging appropriations, it also does not neglect to analyze the claims to power made by critics of appropriation. As Chidester and Taylor (1997) argue, sometimes those who challenge the religious appropriation of symbols do so to preserve their own authority over the tradition in question. Instead of siding with believers of Celtic Christianity or its critics, this perspective allows this thesis to accept that appropriation and syncretism occur in religions and move toward examining how popular beliefs work “on the ground,” particularly regarding care for the environment. Using Chidester’s work with theories of new religious movements and nature religion helps place Celtic Christianity as a kind of supernaturalistic nature spirituality (to use Taylor’s [2001b] term), or an eco-spirituality (to use Ivakhiv’s [2001] term).

Because it places great value upon the earth as God’s basically good creation, Celtic Christian literature calls for engagement in the world to alleviate environmental and social crises which are seen as damaging to the works of God. Organized groups of Celtic Christians, such as those in the Iona Community or in Dara Molloy’s *An Charraig* Community, sometimes engage in activism in support of positive ecological change (organic gardening at *An Charraig*) and issues of non-violence and world peace (the members of the Iona Community present at the Faslane protest). Scholars interested in the relationships between religion and modern ecological and social crises, particularly

those interested in ecotheologies, should examine the popular Celtic Christianity movement. More work revealing actual numbers of believers and identifying communities with particularly strong activist interests would be helpful for further projects, and further analysis of Celtic Christian beliefs and practices may help scholars understand patterns of religious change.

Beyond purely social scientific interest, however, Celtic Christianity might provide a framework for certain believers to deal religiously with ecological and social crises. Compared to the believers of the anthropocentric Christian axiom criticized by White, Celtic Christians might actually be better equipped to help slow human-induced ecological destruction and to construct more sustainable and nurturing communities. They may also express values needed among other Christian groups and, given the increasing intensity of ecological and social crises, may represent an aspect of the “green” future of religious development. Lynn White, Jr. concluded his article, saying, “since the roots of our [ecological] trouble are so largely religious, the remedy must also be essentially religious, whether we call it that or not” (White 2003, 36). Celtic Christianity, based on the practices of its adherents, might represent one such attempt at a remedy and deserves further scholarly study as such

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