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# Celtic Spirituality

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## Preface

**S***pirituality* is a word that is not always to everybody's liking. This is partly because, in the Age of Heroic Materialism, still hugely influential all about us, the word *spirit* and its derivatives seem to be reminiscent of a dualistic and obsolescent Christian Platonism and the negative aura set over this word by some of its most determined practitioners. In addition, like mysticism, as that is (mis)interpreted in the experientialist terms that have been with us since the last century, spirituality seems to require and to invite us to seek out and cultivate very esoteric kinds of inner experience that have little or nothing to do with marrying, begetting and rearing children, harvesting land and sea, and the myriad other activities that crowd together under those comprehensive references to making a living, or getting a life here and now in the only world we know for sure to exist. And this despite the fact that mystics like Meister Eckhart and the author of *The Cloud of Unknowing* make no reference to such special experiences, and others such as John of the Cross and Teresa of Avila attach little or no importance to them.

The most effective way of rescuing spirituality from such unwelcome misapprehensions, then, is to present to the public a world in which, as in Hegel, spirit never leaves and never will leave the body. This is a world of eternally immanent, incarnate spirit—spirit that transcends the whole universe of being toward the ultimate and eternal perfection of the universe, precisely because it is immanent in the whole of it. Spirit, which is especially accessible to and particularly immanent in the essentially

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incarnate human spirit, which is itself increasingly pivotal in the continuous creation and destiny of the only world we know.

Where is such an immanent, incarnate, uncompromisingly this-worldly spirituality in evidence? One answer is the Christian Bible. Follow its logic: the Divine Word, which continuously creates the world, takes human form in Jesus of Nazareth, who, as life-giving spirit, forms his extended body from fellow humans down the ages. It is to this body that the physical world itself looks for a like liberation from evil and finitude, the liberation of the sons of God, until in the eschaton all together share eternal fulfillment in the new heaven-and-earth. Celtic Christianity, then, provides another answer, and not least because it is so thoroughly biblical, and in the end more Antiochene than Alexandrian in its exegesis. It is most obviously biblical in the dominance amongst the genres represented in its surviving literature of commentaries on Scripture, homilies on Scripture and, yes, its profligate and not yet fully audited store of Apocrypha. For the Apocrypha, in addition to increasing our knowledge of noncanonical sources, illustrate also, and much more importantly, that canonical Scripture texts were retold in a manner which simultaneously inculturated the Christian faith and thoroughly formed in scriptural terms the minds of the faithful. One thinks, for instance, of the insertion of the pan-Celtic goddess, Brigid, into the retelling of the infancy narratives.

When one considers another significant genre from Celtic Christian literature—the voyage literature—the this-worldly character of its spirituality is yet more secure. This ancient and fundamental form of religious imagery of exodus and return—in which God travels toward and through creation so that creation can travel to its final and eternal perfection in creative union with God—finds here its cultural equivalent in a visionary journey through the familiar world which all the time tries to envisage a perfected, yet similarly structured world to come, continuous with this world. Obviously, to the Insular Celts, paradise is an island.

Yet Celtic Christianity is a thoroughly embodied spirituality in its general theology, and not just in some of its literary genres. And that is not only a reference to the particular genre constituted

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of formal theological writings; although it is true of these also, as Pelagius in particular illustrates. For Pelagius all of God's creation, all and everything that comes into being by God's continuous creation is good. Nothing that enters the realm of reality by the universal process of bodily becoming can be evil or sinful by that very fact. True, the world of becoming, the world *in via*, is constantly under siege by demonic, destructive forces, which by God's power we must be protected from daily, and which must finally be overcome. But that is an entirely different matter; and in this matter, Pelagius and his fellow spiritual athletes were undoubtedly as right as Augustine was wrong. Everything that comes into existence is good, and especially the newly conceived human being with its will for life and life more abundant, for God is constantly and creatively at work in all that comes to be.

But general theology in the case of the Celts also has a broader range of reference. Taken in its original sense, let us consider the logos of *theos*, the understanding of God's nature and activity. General theology refers to the shape of this understanding implicit over a wider range of literary genres—in the lives of the saints, for example, and other writings of monastic foundations which were, after all, in insular Celtic realms at least, charged with the spiritual formation of the laity also.

Put in its simplest form this general theology of Celtic Christians thinks of the divine being and act or, better, the divine presence and power, flowing in and through what can only be described as an extended family. At the center of that family, where divine being and act are quintessentially concentrated as it were, is of course the divine presence and power flows in and through Mary (very much one of a Quaternity in medieval Gaelic Bardic poetry), the angels (the archangel Michael, for instance, the Celtic Christian "reincarnation" of the god Lugh), the great holy men and women of the Celtic Christian community (Patrick, Columcille, and especially, perhaps, Brigid, the "reincarnation" of the pan-Celtic goddess of the same name, with all her original creative powers intact), the sacral kings, and right down to the natural elements themselves. An awesomely immanent divine being, presence and power, then, could be



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experienced and invoked in and through any and all of these varied embodiments.

Some of course who read stories of the more astonishing effects of this very concretely mediated divine power, in the process of conserving and protecting life, of healing and enhancing it, will talk of magic. They may talk correspondingly of charms instead of prayers when Celtic folk invoke such divine power incarnate in saint or element for such purposes, as happens in many a saint's life, in a *Lorica* or other prayer-form. And some will be offended at the miraculous use of such power to destroy the saint's enemies or their possessions. And all of these, on occasion, will be right to talk like this and to be offended. Celtic Christianity is no more innocent of distorted expression than is any other known version of Christianity.

But it is wise to remember that the charge of magic does not lie against the belief in thoroughgoing immanence of the divine power and presence as such, nor against the forms by which it is invoked, even in such instances as its sustaining and creative presence in sun and sea and wind. The charge of magic can only be sustained against a particular kind of mentality that uses such forms of invocation in any or all of these presences of divine power. It is the mentality that invokes the power immanent in creatures and uses the corresponding prayer, particularly in its ritual form, as if that power could be automatically activated. It is against that mentality that thereby attempts to bypass God's gracious will and thus in effect treats the immanent power as other than the free creative grace of the one, true God, that a charge of magic can reasonably be raised. And from that mentality no religious belief, profession or prayer is absolutely safe. "I accept you, Jesus, as my Savior and Lord"; even that can be used magically; and one may well suspect that it sometimes is.<sup>1</sup>

As for the harshness and, as it is sometimes called, vindictiveness with which divinely empowered holy men and women in the Celtic Christian tradition met the opponents of their persons and mission, one can only say that they had ample evidence of such conduct in the biblical sources to which they were so totally devoted. Yahweh quite frequently ordered the utter destruction

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of such opponents of his "son," Israel; and there is the New Testament example of the fate of Ananias and his wife at the hands of Peter. It may well be, as in the case of magic also, that versions of Christianity which so highlight the utter immanence of the gracious, continually creative God in all ordinary things and events, and which propound a correspondingly this-worldly spirituality, are more prone to these particular distortions than are other versions of Christianity. Then the thing to do is to learn from the special light thrown upon this version of Christianity, while correcting its characteristic, occasional distortions, and to do something similar with other versions of Christianity that may highlight transcendence, for instance, at the expense, at times, of an equally inevitable immanence.

Of course the contention that Celtic Spirituality has the distinctive value of these particular highlights, together with the particular vulnerabilities to which they are exposed, even if the same is claimed for what would then be seen as complementary versions of Christian spirituality, each in its own right, can be and has been opposed by the contrary contention, to wit, that there is no such thing as Celtic Christianity. The case for Celtic Spirituality, with its distinctive affordances, is based then on what might be called the principle of inculturation and on the evidence of a culture shared by a loose family of peoples. And both supports for the case are controverted.

The inculturation principle states that Christianity, like any other religion, inevitably takes shape of the culture—the images and ideas, practices and institutions—in which it is born or to which it travels. Allowance must be made of course for deliberate attempts at times to prevent this natural process from taking effect. So Celtic Christianity has its thoroughly this-worldly spirituality, it is said, because of the character of the already religious culture into which it came. But the inculturation principle entails much more than that. It entails a view of development of religion, or spirituality, and indeed of knowledge which, like the universe itself, is much more evolutionary than static. In short, the much advertised catholicity or universality of Christianity is seen to be achieved, not on the static Enlightenment model of a set



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of abstract truths or doctrines about life and reality that transcend all concrete cultures by being conceptually absolute and unchangeable. Rather, it is based on a more contemporary model of the evolution of reality itself, shaped by the mutations (of religion also) formed in the concrete and local ecological-cultural niche. The ones that promise life and life more abundant spread into other concrete locales in a mutual or rather multiple-interactive process in which universality of application and appropriation are secured, not at the expense of but, quite to the contrary, by very courtesy of the ever increasing enrichment that derives from the distinctive cultural *trans*-formation by each of the mutational *in*-formation each receives from the others.

Toward a further understanding of the inculturation principle, wisdom, which is a way and a life as much as a truth, and all that contributes to wisdom, from science-technology to religion, is conserved and increased, like the evolving creation itself, through a process of mutual enrichment rather than displacement. This process is itself always potentially universal and then practically so, as a result of rather than despite the ability of each ecological-cultural niche to receive the promising transformations of the others into its own native forms. This surely is an acceptable formula, not just for the relationship of religion to culture in general, or for the relationship of Christianity to "primal" religions, or of versions of Christianity to each other, but for the relationship of Christianity to other "world" religions. At the very least it enables the essential, incarnate spirituality of Celtic Christianity, itself due in no small part to the pre-Christian Celtic civilization in which it was (and is) inculturated, to be recommended as an intrinsic part of that process of mutual enrichment by which Christianity is to reach the fulfillment of the ends of the world and of its times.

But there are those who doubt the very existence of a Celtic Christianity or a Celtic spirituality, forged through the inculturation of an incoming Christianity in the "primal" religious culture(s) of peoples called the Celts.<sup>2</sup> Oliver Davies is well aware of these doubts and of even stronger positions along similar lines, and his answer is fair and adequate. Nothing needs to be added,

except perhaps some comment on a term that has become quite common in this kind of debate: the term *insular*.

In the summer of 1991, the Palazzo Grassi in Venice mounted what must surely have been the most comprehensive exhibition of Celtic art the world has yet seen. The exhibition was entitled *I Celti; La Prima Europa* and, instead of the usual catalog, there was offered to visitors to the exhibition what must surely be one of the most comprehensive collections of scholarly articles on the Celts ever assembled in one volume—though these articles were all centered upon the objects on display from the various Celtic territories. Hence a section of this scholarly work (published by Bompiani as, in its English version, *The Celts*), was entitled “The Island Celts,” for the section dealt with the islands of Ireland and Britain, the territories from which almost all of Oliver Davies’s material is drawn. Now the use in this context of the term *insular*, whether used of Celts or of their art, culture, or religion(s), is innocent, informative, and entirely acceptable.

There is another usage of the term *insular* in reference to these same islands, however, that is far from innocent and, rather than being informative, seems designed to carry an unquestioned assumption that in fact no such entities as Celtic peoples, or Celtic art, or culture(s), or religion, or Christianity, and so on, can be detected in these islands. For in these contexts the adjective *insular* is chosen to describe art, or culture, or religion and its constituent parts, so as to deliberately displace the adjective *Celtic*. It is somewhat paradoxical that this second usage of the term *insular* is frequently found amongst those whose professions place them in university departments of Celtic Studies, or Celtic Languages. We might well wonder why, if only in the interests of consistency, we do not hear more often of departments or professors of insular studies, or even insular departments? But the more serious suspicion must be that we are here in the presence of residual imperial rhetoric and its correspondingly (still) colonized minds. For in secular terms, imperial rhetoric is designed to deter the colonized from dwelling on their own identity, which is totally bound up with their culture, and their culture in turn is particularly embodied in their language. And in religious terms, the still



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colonized mind is unable to see what the great Columbanus so clearly saw and so persuasively argued for, namely, that a Christian faith truly incarnate in a particular culture ("in the condition in which we were saved"), can form a creative part of the true unity of a universal church, even one that stoutly acknowledges the still imperially conceived primacy of Rome.

Celtic Christianity, with its distinctive spirituality, did certainly exist, and it still exists in part and is in part recoverable. It has its contributions to make and even its corrections to offer to the other cultural versions of Christianity that together make up the one ever evolving Christian family in the world. Just as in that true cross-cultural dialogue of equals, which is demanded of all of us in the very name of traveling the Christian road to the final and universal fulfillment, it too must be enriched and corrected by other cultural versions of Christianity, and indeed of other religions and even of some very critical secular humanisms. And this puts all of us in debt to the editor who included this volume in the Classics of Western Spirituality series, and most of all in debt of the scholarship of Oliver Davies, with some help from Thomas O'Loughlin. The fine selection of religious texts, together with an enlightening and judicious introduction to their provenance, nature, and content, meets most admirably the needs of those who would wish to recover something of their native Christian spirituality, and of others who would wish to learn something from it as well as to contribute their own insights to it.

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culture and tradition. It is worth noting that the anonymous Dominican author of "Food of the Soul" still reflects a deeply Celtic sensibility in his work despite the European character of his religious formation. But in both Ireland and Wales, following the adoption of continental norms of religious life, the distinctive aspects of the indigenous Christianity were increasingly confined to the sphere of vernacular religion. The *Carmina Gadelica* collections of Gaelic songs from the Highlands and Islands, which were gathered during the second half of the nineteenth century, remain strongly Celtic in kind and are a reminder of the extent to which an oral and minority culture can conserve elements from an earlier tradition.<sup>56</sup>

### TOWARD A CELTIC SPIRITUALITY

The reconstruction of the spirituality of medieval Christians is not an easy task. In the first place, it requires an understanding of a cultural world that was very different from our own. But it is precisely the "otherness" of early medieval Celtic Christianity that makes it attractive to us, for it seems to contain perspectives that must have originated in the religious disposition of tribal peoples virtually untouched by the classical tradition. The Welsh highly valued their direct links with Roman civilization and the Irish came to show a keen interest in the literary culture of Greece and Rome, but important aspects of early Celtic Christianity reflect an orientation different from that which came to predominate throughout the Latin world. Of course, there are real parallels with the Anglo-Saxon Church in its earlier period, and in terms of ecclesiastical structure also with the pre-Carolingian Church more generally. There are parallels too with the early Orthodox Church in Syria and Russia, as there are with the Christianity of certain indigenous groups in the world today.<sup>57</sup> It may be that an ancient form of Christianity survived much longer on the western margins of Europe, where there was, for instance, a relative absence of urban centers, than it did elsewhere. And it is arguable also that at least elements of that tradition survived fitfully into the modern period through the intense

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conservatism of remote monolingual Celtic-speaking communities, whose bards and storytellers preserved early material in an oral medium with a degree of continuity that is unimaginable in the context of an urban environment and a written language.

Whatever the strengths of the classical Christian perspective that became the norm in most parts of western Christendom, many in the world today have become generally skeptical of a number of its key presuppositions. The primacy of the male and the designation of the male as being normative for humanity can be a hindrance to the Christian life. An emphasis on reason to the detriment of the imagination can seem restrictive and diminishing of important human potentialities. The absence of nature, except as literary device or untamed opponent of Christian power, seems counter to a developing ecological consciousness. Also, diverse forms of alienation from the body are visible in modern Western society, from obesity to pornography, for which Christianity (both Protestant and Catholic), with its emphasis on belief and the processes of the mind and persistent tendency to denigrate the physical, must take some responsibility. A number of the Christian texts included in the present volume offer—albeit tentatively in some instances—the outline of alternative paradigms. We see here images of women as agents of power (Brigit); we see implicit and explicit appeals to the place of the imagination at the center of Christian life (art and poetry), and strong images of nature as an autonomous realm that is nevertheless touched by the life of grace (Melangell).<sup>58</sup> Running throughout a number of texts is the awareness of the body as the focus of human existence, not subordinate to the mind in a tortuous relation of subjection and culpability, but thematized as the locus of penance, where penance itself is not self-inflicted mutilation but the reception of new life and the beginning of the transformation that leads to glory (“The Loves of Taliesin”).<sup>59</sup>

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. But the way to



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appropriate traditions from the past, originally practiced in this case in social and spiritual contexts very different from our own, is problematic. Not many readers of this book in New York or London will be remotely in touch with the living fragments of the Celtic religious past, which still survive precariously in remote areas of Ireland, Scotland, Wales, and Brittany. Indeed, it may seem an equally alien world to the inhabitants of Dublin, Edinburgh, Cardiff, or Rennes. Nevertheless, one way in which the texts included in this volume are important is that they alert us to possibilities of Christian existence subtly different from our own, which are both ancient and new.