



Celtic spirituality and the environment

Author:
Graham Duncan¹

Affiliation:
¹Department of Church History and Church Polity, Faculty of Theology, University of Pretoria, South Africa

Correspondence to:
Graham Duncan

Email:
graham.duncan@up.ac.za

Postal address:
Private Bag X20, Hatfield 0028, Pretoria, South Africa

Dates:
Received: 06 Oct. 2014
Accepted: 25 Feb. 2015
Published: 23 Oct. 2015

How to cite this article:
Duncan, G., 2015, 'Celtic spirituality and the environment', *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 71(1), Art. #2835, 10 pages. <http://dx.doi.org/10.4102/hts.v71i1.2835>

Copyright:
© 2015. The Authors. Licensee: AOSIS OpenJournals. This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution License.

Read online:



Scan this QR code with your smart phone or mobile device to read online.

Celtic spirituality has a long and distinguished ancestry with its origins in pre-Christian times. It was inculturated amongst peoples in the far west of Europe, particularly in Ireland, Scotland and the north and south west of England. It was different from Roman Christianity in distinct ways until the mid-7th century CE when Roman Christianity became the norm in Britain. It has experienced various revivals during the history of Christianity, with two contemporary expressions in New Age spirituality and Christian spirituality. From its inception, it has been closely linked to the environment.

Introduction

Celtic religion came to Britain before the Common Era. It was a primal religion, folk religion and traditional religion, which had migrated from the Middle or Far East. It was an earthy religion based on a close and intimate relationship with the environment 'of a very robust, down to earth kind which everywhere made a strong impression on society' (Kritzinger 2014:2) which provided all the resources that sustained life and livelihood. It was established and inculturated (in Bavinck's [1948:92–93] sense of an indigenous process of accommodating much of the traditional lifestyle and spirituality, places and rituals) amongst peoples in the far west of Europe, particularly in lands we know in the present day – the Celts of Ireland, the Picts of Scotland and the Angles and Saxons of the north and south west of England – as a distinctive expression of the Christian faith as opposed to the Roman tradition. This was particularly evident in their differing organisational forms, dates for the celebration of Easter, and their monastic tonsure. Celtic spirituality was holistic, life affirming and faithful. It reached its high point during the Middle (or Dark) Ages following the decline and demise of the Roman Empire and maintained the light of learning and other social and community institutions until the dawn of the Renaissance (Woods 1985:243). During the 20th century, we witness the re-establishment of monastic communities on the Celtic model at Iona (founded 563 CE by Columba) in 1936 by George MacLeod in 1938, largely because '[h]e felt the Christian church exhibited little or no concern for the earth, and his insistence in the early 1940s on an ecological dimension in theology and practice was truly prophetic' (Ferguson 1988:191); and at Lindisfarne (founded 634 CE by Aidan, a disciple of Columba) in 1991. Of particular significance is the Iona community; it is interesting to note that with a revival in Christian Celtic spirituality (Meek 2000:1), secular 'New Age' spiritualities have arisen which are dependent, to a degree, on Eastern religion (Kritzinger 2014:1; Rice 1991:8) and Celtic spirituality (Christian and primal). Meek (2000:8, 33) critically reminds us that it is vital that we eschew a 'romantic ethnic reconstruction' to which many, particularly those who are not conversant with the Celtic languages, are susceptible.

The origin and nature of the Celts

There is a general belief amongst historians that Celtic peoples originated in an Indo-European location to the east of Europe and migrated westward. As the result of their social development, proto-Celtic, Celtic (800 BCE – 500 BCE) and La Tène (500 BCE – 100 BCE) periods were delineated. These periods also marked the emergence of their peculiar languages (Myers 2009:1). McNeill (1974:1) mentions them as having been referred to by Plato and Aristotle in the 4th century BCE.

The first arrival of Celts in Britain occurred during the 8th century BCE and it inaugurated the Iron Age in Britain. A later wave arrived around 400 BCE and made a greater impact due to their cattle rearing (St. Columba was the patron saint of cattle [Ferguson 1988:28]), agriculture and mining metals (from which their distinctive artistic jewellery was fashioned). They were referred to variously as Keltoi, Celts, Galatians and Gauls. Celts, to some extent, lived a marginal existence that was integral to their worldview:

Celtic Christianity is a faith hammered out at the margins. The Celts lived in the margins of Britain, on the margins of Europe and on the margins of Christendom. They lived close to nature, close to the elements, close to God and close to homelessness, poverty and starvation [...] (Bradley 1993:30)



Bradley (1993:82) is at pains to emphasise, however, that this was no romantic, idealised optional existence where they contributed to the enhancement of the environment. Their monastic lifestyle may have contributed to the development of urbanisation with all its attendant potential for abuse of the environment.

The Celts lived in hill forts that had a religious as well as a security purpose to protect their herds of cattle and sheep. Farming also consisted of wheat and barley growing. As Celtic society developed, it was organised into 33 tribal regions throughout the country. They wore 'heavily woven materials with intricate patterns' (Robson 1998) which indicates that sheep as well as cattle were reared. Their culture has been described as 'nomadic, warrior, heroic, tribal, hierarchical and aristocratic' (Doyle n.d.). With regard to religion, their faith was based in their worship of the Goddess or earth Mother (Johnson 2014:126). In Ireland she was designated St. Bride (Robson 1998:5). Celtic priests or Druids dominated this religious system. This period was marked by several significant developments:

The intensification of overseas trade, [...]; the development of fortifications; a massive intensification of mixed farming, [...]; and the disappearance of the burial monuments and ceremonial centres characteristic of the previous centuries. (Falkus & Gillingham 1981:16)

The Christian faith of the Celts

Distinctives

These may be summarised as (St. Leonard's 2014):

- love of God's creation and care for the environment
- closeness between the natural and supernatural (immanence and/or transcendence)
- hospitality: love and respect for others
- desire to become Christ-like – simple life of prayer, peace and love in tune with the natural world
- high regard for children, especially orphans and women
- love of higher learning, especially in monastic communities
- knowledge of Scripture, especially the psalms and gospels, with their intimate sense of God's presence
- Trinitarian theology in creation, redemption and pervading all life with the divine presence
- closeness to God through pilgrimage to remote locations
- inculturation in hostile contexts
- prayer related to normal living.

Here we have an approach to Christian spirituality, which is holistic and integrated; there is no separation between worship and service, activity and meditation; all are one activity – our devotion to God, the creator and provider of all things. Hence, 'the Eucharist and worship [*leitourgia as public service*] encompass the whole world and the whole of creation' (O'Donnell 2014:631).

This we might compare with Turner's (1977) key features of primal religion:

- kinship with nature
- sense of creaturehood

- belief that we are not alone in the world but live in a personalised universe
- belief that we enter a relationship with a benevolent spirit world
- sense that the relationship between humankind and deity extends beyond death
- belief that we inhabit a sacramental universe where the relationship between the physical is osmotic.

This indicates a degree of universalism in religious values, which picks up the idea of the immanence and transcendence of God in uniting all things within Godself. This is reflected in the collection of Celtic folklore, of unclear provenance during the 19th century by Alexander Carmichael in his *Carmina gadelica* (1900); some sources 'may Have their roots in the middle Ages, but how deeply, and how far back in time, is by no means clear' (Meek 2000:71). It may have 'inherited or received a number of nineteenth century preconceptions of "the Celtic character"' (Meek 2000:38).

History

In 409 CE, the Roman legions were recalled from Britain and the Saxons invaded the land. In the ensuing years, Christianity almost disappeared except in those western areas where the Celts retained their irreducible independence, particularly in monastic life as a radical alternative. Along with this in their resistance to the Roman tradition, they constituted 'a spiritual resistance movement in the Western Isles of Scotland' (Newell 1997:7). In the early days of Christianity and in a new age renaissance:

Religion, pagan or Christian, or both combined, permeated everything – blending and shading into one another like the iridescent colours of the rainbow. The people were sympathetic and synthetic, unable to see and careless to know where the secular began and the religious ended – an admirable union of elements in life for those who have lived it so truly and intensely as the Celtic races everywhere have done, and none more truly or more intensely than the ill-understood and so-called illiterate Highlanders of Scotland. ... The Celtic missionaries allowed the pagan stock to stand, grafting their Christian cult thereon. ... figures of birds and beasts, reptiles and fishes, and of men and women representing phallic worship. Here pagan cult joins with Christian faith, the East with the West, the past with the present. (Carmichael 1900:xxxix)

This was the process of inculturation. Celtic Christians gathered in monastic communities as bases for their missionary outreach and educational work. Community was a distinctive feature of their Christian life. It was coenobitical – 'familial, personal and democratic', although there it had an eremitical element (Woods 1985:244). This was, in part, the outcome of their fiery independence, austere living conditions ('violent hail and icy snow which was drifting and blowing everywhere' [Bede v.12:254]; 'solitary habitation' [Bede iii.16:135]; Newell [1997:7] refers to the 'harshness of the elements'; a great drought rendered the land infertile in the years 737 and 741 [Bede *Continuations*:296, 297]) and love of remote places: 'The surging waves, also, at times rolling mountains high in

a great tempest' (Adamnan 1857). The island monastic community of Iona was predominantly:

[...] barren and desert moor. Columba [...] set his monks at once to cultivate the soil. The huts of the brethren were built in a circle round the church, with a guest-house and a simple refectory adjoining. The building was of wood and wattle, and the work proceeded rapidly. (Forbes 1919:399; cf. Meek 2000:148)

Work was honoured and Columba himself took his fair share whilst encouraging a positive spirit amongst his community:

When the manual labours were ended for the day, the monks betook themselves to prayer, reading, or writing, while the less expert could always employ themselves in works of charity for the common good. Even when the brethren were engaged in active labour, they strove to occupy their minds with thoughts of God, so that their work might be hallowed by prayer and bring its blessings on their mission. (Forbes 1919:407)

Life was marked by a strong 'Protestant' work ethic and multitasking.

The Celtic church had two historical features that endured. Firstly, it prepared the way for the emergence of the High Middle Ages; second, it survived by inculturating itself into the Western European Roman church. This process began as the result of Pope Celestine's inauguration of a mission to Ireland (431 CE) and the introduction of monasticism into the Celtic churches.

From 795 CE, the Celts were terrorised by Viking raiders from Scandinavia who primarily targeted monasteries. These informal yet effective violent intrusions continued sporadically for three centuries (Falkus & Gillingham 1981:46). They were finally defeated by the rise of civilisation, inculturation and conversion.

Irish roots of Celtic mission

St. Patrick's work in Ireland had a considerable impact for Ireland, which was a predominantly rural society at the time. Through the growth of the church, Patrick encouraged the establishment of monasteries, which were endowed by patron families. These endowments included land, which the monks and nuns then worked. In addition, villages and towns often then sprang up around the monasteries:

In the absence of urban centers, the monasteries that grew up in Ireland in the sixth and seventh centuries became the centers of Christian life and church government. (Freeman 2004:155)

Thus, Patrick's approach led to the monasteries becoming community centres for local Celtic communities. This had an impact due to its encouragement of agricultural development to feed the growing population, but also in terms of changing the mobility patterns of the population which, in turn, had a double impact on the environment because it changed patterns of settlement and crop cultivation. As mentioned earlier, this aspect of Irish Christianity is important because many Anglo-Saxon missionaries like Boniface also drew on the Iro-Scottish tradition.

Patrick, like his successors, would never have worked alone:

Even in the day before he became a bishop, he would have had clergy and others to help him with the many spiritual and practical tasks involved in a pioneering and often dangerous mission. (Freeman 2004:76)

This provided an example that the pagans would observe as well as colleagues like Columba.

Developments in technology as mission tool

In addition to their community use, three aspects of the work of the Celtic missionaries that would serve to attract the pagans besides the gospel were:

- the productivity of their agricultural efforts
- their impressive buildings and constructions
- the skill and technology of their craftsmanship.

All three of these imply an improvement in the material quality of life that conversion and settling around the monasteries would offer. This is strongly reminiscent of the advice Bishop Daniel of Winchester gave to Boniface for his mission strategy:

Do [*pagans*] think the gods should be worshiped for the sake of temporal and transitory benefits or for eternal and future reward? If for temporal benefit let them say in what respect the heathens are better off than the Christians [...] The heathens are frequently to be reminded of the supremacy of the Christian world and of the fact that they who still cling to outworn beliefs are in a very small minority. (Hillgarth 1986:173)

In monastic *Rules* in the West and in the lives of monks such as Ursus of Auxerre, manual work is linked with prayer and reading, as an integral part of life. From the 5th century onwards, many of the vast forests, marshes and wastelands of Western Europe were settled and utilised by monks who brought them under cultivation who, since they were independent and self-sufficient, were also interested in labour-saving devices such as water-mills. In men like Ursus and his monks, Christianity contributed to what Lynn White has called 'The agricultural revolution of the early middle ages' (cited in Hillgarth 1986:21–22). This led to significant improvements in the quality of rural life.

Monks also imported superior construction skills and methods into the target society. This strategy is strongly reminiscent of the achievement of Benedict Biscop in his mission to the Northumbrian Angles. Bede records that Biscop imported stonemasons from France for the construction of his monastery (Bede 1998:191). This new method of construction must have impressed the Northumbrians, who had never seen such a thing before, as Hillgarth (1986:151) indicates. In the same way, the superior construction method of the monks would speak for itself and help to convince the pagans to convert to a somewhat 'superior' way of life, and therefore, to a superior faith. This is a factor that had indeed played a role in Irish and Anglo-Saxon mission successes; for instance, Bede (1998) adds that when Benedict Biscop was



building his monastery, he not only imported new building technology in the form of masonry, but also glasswork:

When the building was nearing completion he sent his agents across to France to bring over glaziers – craftsmen as yet unknown in Britain – to glaze the windows in the body of the church and in the chapels and clerestory. The glaziers came over as requested but they did not merely execute their commission: they helped the English to understand and to learn for themselves the art of glass-making, an art which was to prove invaluable in the making of lamps for the church and many other kinds of vessels. (p. xi)

This meant that in time, quarries were established to source the raw materials. This would probably have created an appeal to the Christian way of life for the pagans. In addition to glasswork, Biscop introduced to the Northumbrian Angles books, sacred vessels, vestments, pictures, and other things (Bede 1998:191–193). Fletcher (1999) comments:

These textiles and treasures should alert us to the impact which the interiors of these churches might have made upon the senses of those who worshipped in them; a not insignificant element in considering the process of Christianization. (p. 62)

Thus, monks imported new types of artifacts that appealed to the senses, as well as others that proved to be useful for daily life, and they taught their converts the skill of making and using them. The monks also often introduced new technology in terms of construction methods and artwork, which in turn had an impact on the way the environment, was manipulated. All of these factors would enable a visually and demonstrably more advanced way of life that was more productive at the same time. Concurrent with this, a disciple of Patrick arrived in Scotland.

Columba of Iona

St. Columba (521 CE – 597 CE) was a well-known Irish prophetic seer in his day who established a monastic and missionary centre on the Scottish island of Iona in 563 CE. Celtic Christianity was influenced by many miracles which are attributed to Columba regarding nature and the environment; these include the wine which was formed from water (Adamnan II.i), the bitter fruit of a tree changed into sweet by the blessing of the water (Adamnan II.ii), a pestilential cloud and the curing of many (Adamnan II.iv), the cures of various diseases which took place in the Ridge of Ceate (Druimceatt) (Adamnan II.vi), the danger to the blessed man at Sea and the sudden calm produced by his prayers (Adamnan II.ix), and how an aquatic monster at Loch Ness was driven off by virtue of the blessed man's prayer (Adamnan II.xxviii). Menzies (1949:13) expresses the following view: 'We ought not to make too much of that because it was characteristic of the age he lived in'. According to Menzies (1949):

Many of Columba's miracles can be explained by natural causes; in any case they are invaluable because of the light they shed on his character and on the life and beliefs of his time. (p. 15)

Columba was an ascetic who believed that austere living was a form of penance for the love of Christ. His love

of Iona was derived from its remoteness where the sea offered his community protection until the Viking raids began. Trenholme (1909) describes the origin of the island environment of Iona some 2700 million years ago:

When our planet from a glowing mass of combustion like the sun, shrivelled into a globe with a solid crust and the first oceans condensed in its hot surface – then it was that the Archaean rocks, of which Iona and the Outer Hebrides consist, were formed on the sea bottom. They contain no fossils, for so far as is known no living creature as yet existed in the desolate waste of waters or on the primeval land. They are hard, rugged and twisted and in Iona as elsewhere, marble has been developed by the vast heat and pressure they have undergone. (p. 8)

Iona is famous for its Marble Quarry, the first station on the present day weekly pilgrimage round the island (Iona Community n.d.:19). Stephenson (2011), writing over a century later, does not differ in essence:

Much of Iona consists of metamorphic rocks that formed over 2500 million years ago from a wide variety of even older rocks, which were modified by heat and intense pressure deep in the Earth's crust. The original rocks included both sedimentary rocks, deposited by rivers or on a lake- or seabed, and igneous rocks, formed from magma that crystallised at depth. However, they have been so altered by repeated earth movements during their long history that any traces of the original rock have been obliterated. They now appear as coarse-grained streaked and banded rocks, known collectively as 'gneisses' and form the Lewisian Gneiss Complex. The landscape that develops on these hard resistant rocks is typically one of low, well-rounded rocky knolls separated by boggy hollows with poor acid soils, just as one sees over most of the Outer Hebrides. (p. 19)

The result is that of the 2000 acres of land on Iona, only one third can be cultivated. Yet, it has a rich and varied bird life. The sea offers up flounders, rock-cod, saith, lobster, salmon and mackerel. Seals are in evidence, as are whales and porpoises. Adamnan (I:xiii) possibly refers to a shark as a 'huge monster' 'bristling with teeth' and Baithene, Columba's successor at Iona, 'raising up both his hands, blessed the sea and the whale'. There was no shortage of vegetation, which included shrubs, herbs and bushes.

Yet, it was a subsistence existence dependent on meat, pork, mutton and fish. The cultivatable land was not deep and could not support root crops. The normal diet consisted of porridge, bread, eggs, fish, pottage of nettles and milk, supplemented on occasion by seal and salmon. Beef and mutton were for Sundays and feast days.

The livers of fish and seals produced oil to light their 'crusies' [lamps]. Wool was combed, carded, spun, woven and dyed. Most structures were of wattle and daub. Vessels were made from wood. Tools were fashioned from stone, flint, bronze and iron (Menzies 1949:46–47). Peat provided fuel lit by flint, steel and tinder (Menzies 1949:53). Even the writing materials that produced beautiful illuminated manuscripts were home produced in order to emphasise the glory and

praise of God. Life was difficult and the monks shared in it. Columba developed a strict rule, which included:

Follow almsgiving before all things.
 Take not of food till thou art hungry.
 Sleep not until thou feelest desire.
 Speak not except on business.
 Every increase which comes to thee in lawful meals or in wearing apparel, give it for pity to the brethren that want it or to the poor in like manner.
 The love of God with all thy heart and all thy strength.
 The love of thy neighbour as thyself.
 Abide in the testaments of God throughout all times.
 The measure of prayer shall be until thy tears come;
 Or the measure of thy work of labour till thy tears come:
 Or thy measure of thy work of labour, or of thy genuflexions until thy perspiration come often, if thy tears are not free.
 (cited in Menzies 1949:63)

Work and prayer, as we have seen, were integrated into a holiness code governed by a simple lifestyle. Besides the introduction of technology, one might also name Benedict of Nursia's rule with its maxim of '*ora et labora*' – the labour aspect of the work of monks often took the form of cultivating the land, indeed of making it arable in the first place. Thus draining swamps and marshes was a frequent endeavour, for example. Other examples include the felling of trees, the introduction of different plants.

The physical community consisted of a group of huts surrounded by earthen ramparts. There was a church, refectory, Columba and the monks' huts, the *hospitium* (the 'guest house' at Iona was nearly always occupied by all sorts of people, from kings to fugitives from justice, who came to ask counsel of Columba [Menzies 1949:49]). Beyond the boundary rampart were the cowshed, two barns, the smithy, stable, the carpenter's shop, the kiln and the mill. Although Iona was a centre for medical care, there is no mention of an infirmary. Houseleeks, sorrel and marsh-mallows were used in the preparation of drugs. For the 7th century, this was a basic yet sophisticated community.

Columba came to a society dominated by the religion of the druids. This provided an enduring legacy, which Columba sought to integrate with his Christian faith founded on the incarnation: 'Celtic heathenism was not uprooted; it was modified and many of its practices were "sained" (sanctified through inculturation) by the Cross and thus baptised into Christ' (Menzies 1949:74). Iona became a missionary centre and the source of the Christianisation of what we now recognise as Scotland. It developed its own distinctive spiritual ethos.

For Scots and many others, 'to tell the story of Iona is to go back to God and to end in God' (MacLeod 1913:10). It is holy ground – 'a very thin place [...] where there's no[t] much between Iona and the Lord' (Underhill 1946:196). It was and is a place of peace and serenity where living so close to the heart of nature people seemed able to penetrate the material world in their apprehension of the spiritual world. This was the traditional burial place of kings.

Celtic Christianity, in all these things and in all these ways, 'its dynamism and creativity, its art and sense of creation, its seeing God in all things' (Ferguson 1988), made a deep impression on the Christian west not least in its reverence of the created order.

Reverence of creation

THOU King of the moon,
 Thou King of the sun,
 Thou King of the planets,
 Thou King of the stars,
 Thou King of the globe,
 Thou King of the sky,
 Oh! lovely Thy countenance,
 Thou beauteous Beam
 (Carmichael 1900:29; *Rune of the Muthairn*)

Love of creation is manifested in the Celtic appreciation of beauty expressed in poems and *runes* about the natural world. It was also manifested in other art forms:

The monks' great scholarly achievements were matched by an equally great love of beauty, especially in nature, which was brilliantly expressed in a variety of artistic forms. There the mystical element of Celtic spirituality became manifest with its paradoxical tensions between the senses of nearness and farness of God, the melancholy fleetingness of all life, and the vanity of the world, yet the grandeur and wonder of creation in all its ecstatic and myriad loveliness. Such opposition may reflect a fundamental ambivalence in the Celtic temperament as well as the character of the land itself: uncommonly beautiful yet frequently harsh, poor, rocky, and sea-washed, blessed with a mild but wet climate, and therefore also boggy. (Woods 1985:248)

Here, 'creation is viewed sacramentally' (Newell 1997:8); 'the world is the temple of God' (Newell 1997:7) where monks and others experienced a 'deep soul connection with the mystery that sustains creation' (Silf 2011:76) and where peace and harmony are the main objectives in a 'crucible of transformation' (Silf 2011:77) through an enduring and close encounter with the living God (Ps 139). This abiding love of all creation was a hallmark of Celtic faith.

In matters of faith, Celts were influenced by traders coming from the east bringing stories of the lives and witness of the Eastern Fathers, the inspiration of Martin of Tours who provided the inspiration for his disciple, Ninian (360 CE – 432 CE), founder of the mission to Scotland. He advocated adhering to the simplicity of the gospel and an ascetic form of lifestyle promoted by the eastern fathers since the time of Antony (b. 253 CE). Particularly of the Holy Spirit, Celtic Christians integrated the history of salvation into their own distinctive history by:

Ever inviting God into their activities and seeking to become aware of him in everyday events [...] [as] the most natural way of doing this. [...] to walk the edge of glory and see for oneself the ever abiding presence. (Adam 1985:2–3)

This suggests the meeting place of the immanent and the transcendent. Celtic Christianity even used the environment to promote its ascetic lifestyle as spiritual training and



discipline. As a severe penitential rite, one ascetic, Petroc, retreated to the banks of a river where:

He often used to enter it in his great longing to chastise his body, frequently immersing himself beneath the water; he would remain thus motionless, reciting prayers and psalms for as long as he could endure it [...] (Bede v.12:258)

On another occasion, one weary monk having spent the day harvesting shared what was the common experience of his colleagues:

I perceive the fragrance of such a wonderful odour, just as if all the flowers on earth were gathered together into one place; I feel also a glow of heat within me, not at all painful, but most pleasing, and a certain unusual and inexpressible joy poured into my heart, which of a sudden so refreshes and gladdens me, that I forget grief and weariness of every kind. (Adamnan 1.xxix)

They were governed by bishops, abbots and *peregrini* (itinerant saints). Unlike the Roman Catholic Church, bishops had a roving itinerant commission rather than a territorial one. This freed them for missionary outreach. Abbots were in charge of monasteries and peregrini sought out remote places to live. They learned from their eastern roots (Leech 1994:46) that there was no 'detached' theology but it was 'an encounter with the living God [...] of solitude [...] constantly related to an authentic living situation' (Leech 1994:32). This was integrated into family life:

BLESS, O Threefold true and bountiful,
Myself, my spouse, and my children,
My tender children and their beloved mother at their head.
On the fragrant plain, on the gay mountain sheiling,
On the fragrant plain, on the gay mountain sheiling.
Everything within my dwelling or in my possession,
All kine and crops, all flocks and corn,
From Hallow Eve to Beltane Eve,
With goodly progress and gentle blessing,
From sea to sea, and every river mouth,
From wave to wave, and base of waterfall.
(Carmichael 1900:183)

Here there is the expectation of a sufficiency to meet life's needs:

EACH meal beneath my roof, ...
They will all be mixed together,
In name of God the Son,
who gave them growth.
Milk, and eggs, and butter,
The good produce of our own flock,
There shall be no dearth in our land,
nor in our dwelling.
Humble us at thy footstool,
Be thine own sanctuary around us,
Ward from us spectre, sprite, oppression,
and preserve us.
Consecrate the produce of our land,
Bestow prosperity and peace,
In name of the Father the King,
and of the three beloved apostles.

In addition, there is ample reward for the hallowing of creation and its conclusion with a rest day:

The Lord's Day, the seventh day,
God ordained to take rest,
To keep the life everlasting,
Without taking use of ox or man,
Or of creature as Mary desired,
Without spinning thread of silk or of satin,
Without sewing, without embroidery either,
Without sowing, without harrowing, without reaping,
Without rowing, without games, without fishing,
Without going out to the hunting hill,
Without trimming arrows on the Lord's Day,
Without cleaning byre, without threshing corn,
Without kiln, without mill on the Lord's Day.
Whosoever would keep the Lord's Day,
Even would it be to him and lasting,
From setting of sun on Saturday
Till rising of sun on Monday.
He would obtain recompense therefrom,
Produce after the ploughs,
Fish on the pure salt-water stream,
Fish excelling in every river confluence.
The water of the Lord's Day mild as honey,
Whoso would partake of it as drink
Would obtain health in consequence
From every disease afflicting him.
(Carmichael 1900:218–219; *The poem of the Lord's Day*)

This was a life sustained by agriculture, fishing, warfare (defence), fine arts, leisure and devotion. Due to their belief in the transfiguration and resurrection, they believed that humanity was sacred and that holiness was pervasive in creation and the environment, even in the lowliest task in the home within the community. God is given the glory:

I WILL kindle my fire this morning
In presence of the holy angels of heaven,
In presence of Ariel of the loveliest form,
In presence of Uriel of the myriad charms,
Without malice, without jealousy, without envy,
Without fear, without terror of any one under the sun,
But the Holy Son of God to shield me.
Without malice, without jealousy, without envy, [...]
(Carmichael 1900:231; *Blessing of the kindling*)

God's presence is manifested in all things, in the majesty of creation:

I see the hills, I see the strand,
I see the host upon the wing.
I see angels on clouds, waves
Coming with speech and friendship to us.
(Carmichael 1900:139; *Hey the gift*)

God was the protector of his creation and humanity as can be seen in the life of the Irish Patrick (b. 389 CE) who is thought to have written:

The Three in One, and One in Three,
Of whom all nature hath creation.
(St. Patrick's breastplate; in Robson 1998:112)

God's protection was sought for day and night:

God, protect the house, and the household,
God, consecrate the children of the motherhood,

God, encompass the flocks and the young;
 Be Thou after them and tending them,
 What time the flocks ascend hill and wold,
 What time I lie down to sleep,
 What time the flocks ascend hill and wold,
 What time I lie down in peace to sleep.
 (Carmichael 1900:109; *House Protecting*)

No distinction is made between care of the family and the domestic family animals. A rather romantic view of creation is to be found on the epitaph of the tomb of King Caedwalla (d. 689):

There taste at his pure fount the streams divine
 Whence flows a quickening glory through the earth.
 (Bede v.7:208)

In all of this praise, we need to be reminded that the environment was harsh and the strong faith of isolated groups of Christians kept Christianity alive in this western part of the Roman Empire: 'When crops failed, there was terrible hardship, and the lives of fishermen were often lost at sea' (Newel 1997:7). On the land God's blessing was no less vital in sowing:

I WILL go out to sow the seed,
 In name of Him who gave it growth;
 I will place my front in the wind,
 And throw a gracious handful on high.
 Should a grain fall on a bare rock,
 It shall have no soil in which to grow;
 As much as falls into the earth,
 The dew will make it to be full
 (Carmichael 1900L 243; *Consecration of the seed*)

Moreover, in reaping:

GOD, bless Thou Thyself my reaping,
 Each ridge, and plain, and field,
 Each sickle curved, shapely, hard,
 Each ear and handful in the sheaf,
 Each ear and handful in the sheaf.
 (Carmichael 1900:247; *Reaping blessing*)

Then he sees the process through to the harvest;

I will give thanks to the King of grace
 For the growing crops of the ground,
 He will give food to ourselves and to the flocks
 According as He disposeth to us.
 (Carmichael 1900:247; *Reaping blessing*)

The whole family took up the strain of joy and thanksgiving and praised the God of the harvest, who gave them corn and bread, food and flocks, wool and clothing, health and strength, and peace and plenty. Despite this, the monks became adept fishermen as well as agriculturists. Their God was all-powerful. He lived in and amongst them. By drawing a circle, or *caim*, around themselves each day and seeking his protection, they had no need to live in fear:

Circle me Lord
 Keep protection near
 And danger afar.
 Circle me Lord

Keep hope within
 Keep doubt without.
 Circle me Lord
 Keep light near
 And darkness afar.
 Circle me Lord
 Keep peace within
 Keep evil out.
 (Adam 1985:8)

Celtic runes (inscriptions including intricate intertwining lines signifying the continuity of life in the present and the hereafter) and poems symbolise this profound reverence for the environment. A 7th century CE poem emphasises this spiritual sensitivity:

I wish, O Son of God, O son of the living God, O ancient eternal king,
 For a hidden little hut in the wilderness, that it may be my dwelling.
 An all grey little lark to be by its side,
 A clear pool to wash away sins through the grace of the Holy Spirit,
 A southern aspect for warmth, a little brook across its floor,
 A choice land with many gracious gifts such as be good for every plant,
 A pleasant church, and with the linen altar cloth, a dwelling for God in heaven,
 Then, shining candles above the pure white scriptures –
 This is the husbandry I would take, I would choose, and I will not hide it;
 Fragrant leeks, hens, salmon, trout, bees,
 Raiment and food enough for me from the King of fair fame,
 And I to be sitting for a while praying to God in every place.
 (Ferguson 1988:37–38)

There is no hierarchy of reverence here – all are venerated equally. This creation includes all humanity whom he has endowed with intelligence and freedom, whilst the animals have been given more power in many cases.

Cattle were highly regarded. The herding runes are examples of purely pastoral poems. They are sung by the people as they send their flocks to the pastures, or tend them on the hills, glens, or plains, but everywhere is the simple belief that the King of shepherds watches over men and flocks now as of old – 'the same yesterday, to-day, and for ever':

I WILL place this flock before me,
 As was ordained of the King of the world,
 Bride to keep them, to watch them, to tend them.
 On ben, on glen, on plain,
 Bride to keep them, to watch them, to tend them,
 On ben, on glen, on plain.
 Arise, thou Bride the gentle, the fair,
 Take thou thy lint, thy comb, and thy hair,
 Since thou to them madest the noble charm,
 To keep them from straying, to save them from harm,
 Since thou to them madest the noble charm,
 To keep them from straying, to save them from harm.
 From rocks, from drifts, from streams,
 From crooked passes, from destructive pits,
 From the straight arrows of the slender ban-shee,
 From the heart of envy, from the eye of evil,
 From the straight arrows of the slender ban-shee,



From the heart of envy, from the eye of evil.
 Mary Mother, tend thou the offspring all,
 Bride of the fair palms, guard thou my flocks,
 Kindly Columba, thou saint of many powers,
 Encompass thou the breeding cows, bestow on me herds,
 Kindly Columba, thou saint of many powers,
 Encompass thou the breeding cows, bestow on me herds.
 (Carmichael 1900:275; *Herdling blessing*)

Bride is St. Bridget of Ireland, venerated in the Eastern orthodox tradition, whose feast day, 01 February, marked the beginning of spring, lambing and lactation in cattle. However, prayers were said on behalf of all domestic animals:

May the Spirit of peace preserve the flocks,
 May the Son of Mary Virgin preserve the flocks,
 May the God of glory preserve the flocks,
 May the Three preserve the flocks,
 From wounding and from death-loss,
 from wounding and from death-loss.
 (Carmichael 1900:281; *Guarding the flocks*)

In addition, for those not yet born:

I WILL rise early on the morning of Monday,
 I will sing my rune and rhyme,
 I will go sunwise with my cog
 To the nest of my hen with sure intent.
 I will place my left hand to my breast,
 My right hand to my heart,
 I will seek the loving wisdom of Him
 Abundant in grace, in broods, and in flocks. ...
 The gladsome brood will come on Friday. In name of the most
 Holy Trinity,
 In name of Columba kindly,
 I will set the eggs on Thursday,
 The gladsome brood will come on Friday.
 (Carmichael 1900:287; *Hatching blessing*)

The animals do not only produce food but also clothing:

So that we may obtain from them wool,
 And nourishing milk to drink,
 And that no dearth may be ours
 of day clothing
 (Carmichael 1900:295; *The chant of the warping*)

The act of hunting was governed by spiritual and ethical principles. A young man was consecrated before he went out to hunt. He was anointed with oil, a bow was placed in his hand, and he was required to stand with bare feet on the bare grassless ground. Many conditions were imposed on the young man, which he was required to observe throughout life. He was not to take life wantonly. He was not to kill a bird sitting, or a beast lying down, and he was not to kill the mother of a brood, or the mother of a suckling. Nor was he to kill either an unfledged bird or a suckling beast, unless it might be the young of a bird, or of a beast, of prey.

The entire animal kingdom is venerated. Adamnan (I.xxxiii) refers to the protection extended 'to the little island where our young seals are brought forth and nurtured'. A robber died as a result of this threat. Yet, Columba of Iona sent 'a fat

sheep and six pecks of corn as a last gift' (Adamnan I.xxxiii) which were used at his funeral:

A crane, hath been driven about by various winds, shall come, weary and fatigued, after the ninth hour, and lie down before thee on the beach quite exhausted. Treat that bird tenderly, take it to some neighbouring house, where it may be kindly received and carefully nursed and fed by thee for three days and three nights. When the crane is refreshed with the three days' rest, and is unwilling to abide any longer with us, it shall fly back with renewed strength to the pleasant part of Scotia (Ireland) from which it originally hath come. This bird do I consign to thee with such special care because it cometh from our own native place.
 (Adamnan I.xxxv)

This has implications as Pelagius (390 CE – 418 CE) (in Robson 1998) makes clear:

We alone are able to recognise God as our maker, and therefore to understand the goodness of God's creation. We alone have the capacity to distinguish between good and evil, right and wrong. This means that our actions need not be compulsions, we do not have to be swayed by our immediate wants and desires, as are the animals. Instead, we can make choices. Day by day, hour by hour, we have to make decisions. In each decision we can choose either good or evil. This freedom to choose makes us like God. If we choose evil, that freedom becomes a curse. If we choose good, it becomes our greatest blessing'. (p. 103)

Hence:

CREW	No anxiety can be ours.
HELMSMAN	What can cause you anxiety And the King of the elements over you?
CREW	No anxiety can be ours.
HELMSMAN	What can cause you anxiety And the Spirit of the elements over you
CREW	No anxiety can be ours.
ALL	The God of the elements, The King of the elements, The Spirit of the elements, Close over us, Ever eternally. (Carmichael 1900:335; <i>Sea prayer</i>)

Social action

Celtic Christianity was marked by its political character seeking justice and charity. Celts were social activists through the media of pastoral care and spiritual development. This included preaching, celebration of the sacraments and spiritual direction with its distinctive emergence of the *anamchara* or 'soul friend' as the source of spiritual direction and cure of souls (Thurian 1958:69). The development of the Celtic penitentials (codes of penances and ecclesiastical penalties) also contributed to common spiritual welfare, which 'represented a liberal effort to ensure some measure of equality in pastoral practice', balanced by the 'irreducible Celtic tendency toward independence of the spirit' (Woods 1985:248). This was distributive justice and it was maintained in the political sphere:

To all the princes of Ireland, especially to those who were of his own blood, Columbcille [*Columba*] preached compassion and mercy towards their enemies, the forgiveness of injuries, and the recall of exiles. (Forbes 1919:585)



Social justice was equally prominent, as is seen in the treatment of women, some of whom occupied superior positions to men as in the case of Bridget (452–524) and Hilda (618–680), abbess of Whitby (Robson 1998:190–191) who exercised ecclesiastical authority. Children who were fostered or were orphans were also honoured. Hospitality was a key precept of the Celts:

The cows have grass to eat,
the rabbits have burrows for shelter,
the birds have warm nests.
But the poor have no food except what you feed them,
no shelter except your house when you welcome them,
no warmth except your glowing fire.
(Traditional Celtic; 8th century in Robson 1998:56)

This was a distinct feature of life on Iona where:

No sooner were the monks settled in their new home, than pilgrims came from every quarter to ask counsel of Columba or to embrace the religious life under his direction. ... Kneeling before them he would loosen their sandals and wash their feet, which he kissed with reverent devotion; performing for them, in imitation of his Divine Master, the lowliest of services. (Forbes 1919:415)

Derived from the example of the eastern monastics, this warmth and openness showed an appreciation of the welcome of the stranger as the welcome offered to Christ himself. Adamnan (1.ii) records the arrival of Finten on Iona soon after Columba's death (597 CE): 'he was only received at first with the hospitality given to every unknown stranger'. Strict as the rules on fasting were, they were set aside in order to render hospitality as with the arrival of Aidan (Adamnan 1.xx): 'Thou art the door of the chief of hospitality' (Carmichael 1900:9).

On the last night of the old year, a Hogmanay song was offered:

We are come to the door,
To see if we be the better of our visit.
(Carmichael 1900:157)

Such was the expectation of the visitor.

Conclusion

In our assessment of Celtic spirituality which clearly took up the challenges of its time, it is important to take account of the 'highly reconstructed [nature of] "Celtic Christianity"' (Meek 2000:159) that has come down to us through the centuries.

Celtic spirituality was holistic and integrated; life was one and was lived under the guidance and protection of God on whom the people were very dependent. There was a unity of all things in God – humans, the animal kingdom and the physical environment. It was reflective and based in a strong sense of solidarity within the community, the environment and the community of God as Trinity. Hence, it was a life of total interdependence, a way of 'daily life as a living vocation' (Kishkovsky 2014:838). It was also enduring as Carmichael (1900) discovered many centuries later:

Their descendants are described as 'good to the poor, kind to the stranger, and courteous to all. During all the years that I lived and travelled among them, night and day, I never met with incivility, never with rudeness, never with vulgarity, never with aught but courtesy. I never entered a house without the inmates offering me food or apologising for their want of it. I never was asked for charity in the West [of Scotland] ... (p. xxvii)

Historically, Celtic spirituality was rooted in the 3rd and 4th century eastern Christian tradition, merged with the Roman tradition at the Synod of Whitby (664 CE), and was taken up by churches of the Reformation. Hence, it is linked closely with the Orthodox, Roman Catholic, Anglican and Reformed traditions, all of which trace their foundations back to the church of the Early Fathers. It is therefore truly ecumenical in establishing a firm foundation for restoring and further building the future household of God.

Acknowledgements

Competing interests

The author declares that he has no financial or personal relationships which may have inappropriately influenced him in writing this article.

References

- Adam, D., 1985, *Edge of glory: Prayers in the Celtic tradition*, Triangle/SPCK, London.
- Adamnan (c. 624–704), 1857, *Life of Saint Columba, Founder of Hy*, W. Reeves (ed.), Edmonston and Douglas, Edinburgh.
- Bavinck, J.H., 1948, *Zending in een wereld in nood*, Zomer en Keuning's Uitgeversmmatschapij, Wegeningen.
- Bede, Webb, J.F. & Farmer, D.H., 1998, *The Age of Bede*, Penguin Books, London.
- Bede, 2008, *The ecclesiastical history of the English people*, in J. McClure & R. Collins (eds.), Oxford University Press, Oxford.
- Bradley, I., 1993, *The Celtic way*, Longman & Todd, London.
- Carmichael, A., 1900, *Carmina gadelica*, viewed 08 September 2014, from <http://www.sacred-texts.com/neu/celt/cg1/>
- Doyle, D., n.d., *Celtic spirituality*, viewed 27 August 2014, from <http://english.glendale.cc.ca.us/christ.html>
- Falkus, M. & Gillingham, J. (eds.), 1981, *Historical atlas of Britain*, Book Club Associates, London.
- Ferguson, R., 1988, *Chasing the wild goose: The Iona community*, Fount, London.
- Fletcher, R., 1999, *The barbarian conversion: From Paganism to Christianity*, University of California Press, Berkeley, CA.
- Forbes, F.A., 1919, *The life of Saint Columba Apostle of Scotland*, Public Domain, London.
- Freeman, P., 2004, *St. Patrick of Ireland: A biography*, Simon & Schuster, New York, NY.
- Hillgarth, J.N. (ed.), 1986, *Christianity and Paganism, 350–750: The conversion of western Europe*, 2nd edn., University of Pennsylvania Press, Philadelphia, PA.
- Iona Community n.d., *The Abbey services of the Iona community*, Iona Community Publishing Department, Glasgow.
- Johnson, E.A., 2014, *Ask the beasts: Darwin and the God of love*, Bloomsbury, London.
- Kishkovsky, L., 2014, 'Reconciliation, peace and forgiveness as a task for Orthodox involvement in ecumenism', in P. Kalaitzidis, T. Fitzgerald, C. Hovorun, A. Pekridou, N. Aspruolis, D. Werner & G. Liagre (eds.), *Orthodox handbook on ecumenism: Resources for theological education*, pp. 838–842, Regnum, London.
- Kritzinger, J.J., 2014, 'The Celtic connection with southern Africa: Tracing a genealogy of missionary spirituality', *Verbum at Ecclesia* 35(1), Art. #1327, 8 pages, <http://dx.doi.org/10.4102/ve.v35i1.1327>
- Leech, K., 1994, *Soul friend: Spiritual direction in the modern world*, Darton, Longman & Todd Ltd., London.
- MacLeod, F., 1913, *The isle of dreams (from Iona)*, T.N. Foulis, Edinburgh.
- McNeill, J.T., 1974, *The Celtic churches: A history, AD 200–1200*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, IL.
- Meek, D.E., 2000, *The quest for Celtic Christianity*, Handsel Press, Edinburgh.
- Menzies, L., 1949, *St. Columba of Iona*, The Iona Community, Glasgow.



- Myers, B., 2009, *The mysteries of Druidry*, viewed 27 August 2014, from <http://www.brendanmyers.net/wickedrabbit/index.php?option=com>
- Newell, P.J., 1997, *Celtic prayers from Iona*, Paulist Press, New York, NY.
- O'Donnell, G., 2014, 'Ecumenical implications of the Orthodox understanding of worship and liturgy', in P. Kalaitzidi, T. Fitzgerald, C. Hovorun, A. Pekridou, N. Aspruolis, D. Werner & G. Liagre (eds.), *Orthodox handbook on ecumenism: Resources for theological education*, pp. 623–632, Regnum, Oxford.
- Rice, H.L., 1991, *Reformed spirituality*, Westminster, Louisville, KY.
- Robson, P., 1998, *The Celtic heart: An anthology of prayers and poems in the Celtic tradition*, Fount (Harper Collins), London.
- Silf, M., 2011, *Landscapes of prayer*, Lion Hudson, Oxford.
- Stephenson, D., 2011, *Mull and Iona: A landscape fashioned by geology*, Scottish National Heritage/Edinburgh, British Geological Survey, Inverness.
- St. Leonard's, 2014, *Celtic spirituality – An explanation*, viewed 27 August 2014, from <http://www.stleonardshorsham.org.uk>
- Thurian, M., 1958, *Confession*, SCM, London.
- Trenholme, E.C., 1909, *The story of Iona*, D. Douglas, Edinburgh.
- Turner, H.W., 1977, *New religious movements in primal societies*, G.K. Hall, Boston, MA.
- Underhill, E., 1946, *Collected papers of Evelyn Underhill*, Longmans, Green & Company, New York, NY.
- Woods, R., 1985, 'The spirituality of the Celtic church', *Spirituality Today* 3, 243–255.