

CELTIC SPIRITUALITY AND THE ENVIRONMENT

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"IF YOU WANT TO KNOW THE CREATOR UNDERSTAND CREATED THINGS" ADVISED COLUMBANUS IN THE SIXTH CENTURY AD. His enthusiasm for the "created things" appeals to modern day environmentalists. Many Christians, myself included, are discovering an additional vigour to their faith through an interest in "green issues". While it is not difficult to discover environmental themes within Celtic literature and art, we must exercise some caution, at least initially, unless looking down the well of time to the age of the Celts we merely find our own views reflected there. Equally, we must be cautious about identifying exclusively with the Celtic church of the fourth to eighth centuries. Our world is vastly different from theirs, and even were it desirable to recreate a Celtic "golden age" our knowledge of those times is too fragmented to enable it to be done. However, as we use the Bible to inform our faith and try interpreting it for our generation, we can only benefit from the received wisdom of our Celtic forebears, because they had great success in making the gospel relevant to the lives of ordinary people.

LIVING CLOSE TO NATURE

The Celts understood "created things". They lived close to nature because their survival depended on successful farming and fishing. When Columbanus and his Irish monks travelled into continental Europe they had few possessions apart from the gospel. Upon settling at Annegrai, "they had found a wilderness around a pile of ruins". In the first year yields were poor due to bad weather; during the second year they fared better. After three years "they had transformed this wilderness into a beautiful park and garden [and] as a result of this labour their lands ... became the richest and best in Burgundy".¹

At a deeper spiritual level, survival depended on identifying God in the varied aspects of creation, as armament against the evil spiritual forces arrayed against the believer. So in the prayer entitled "St Patrick's breastplate", the author expresses profound security based on a trinitarian panentheism:

I bind unto myself today,
The strong name of the Trinity,
By Invocation of the same,
The Three in One and One in Three.
I bind unto myself today,
The virtues of the starlit heaven,
The glorious sun's life-giving ray,
The whiteness of the moon at even,

Our final destiny in Christ is inextricably caught up with God's purpose for the whole of creation. The final salvation of the environment depends on our acceptance of salvation for ourselves.

NOTES

- 1 Walter T. Leahy, *Columbanus The Celt* (Philadelphia: H. L. Kilner & Co, 1913), pp. 229–30.
 2 Robert Van de Weyer, *Celtic Fire* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1990), pp. 33–4.
 3 Alexander Carmichael, *Carmina Gadelica* (Edinburgh: Floris Books, 1992).
 4 Janet Backhouse, *The Lindisfarne Gospels* (Oxford: Phaidon Press, 1981).
 5 Martin Robinson, *Rediscovering the Celts* (London: Fount, 2000), p. 97.
 6 Ian Bradley, *God Is Green* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1990), p. 2.
 7 Ian Bradley, *The Celtic Way* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1993), pp. 51–4.
 8 For a fuller discussion see Robinson, *Rediscovering the Celts*, pp. 108–12.
 9 Bradley, *Celtic Way*, p. 59.
 10 David Adam, *The Cry Of The Deer* (London: Triangle/SPCK), p. 88.
 11 *Ibid.*, pp. 90–1.
 12 John O'Donohue, *Eternal Echoes* (London: Bantam Books), pp. xvii, 10.
 13 *Ibid.*, p. 22.
 14 Peter De Vos, Calvin De Wit, Eugene Dykema, Vernon Ehlers and Loren Wilkinson, *Earthkeeping In The '90s* (Grand Rapids: Erdmans, 1991), p. 141.

The flashing of the lightning free,
 The whirling wind's tempestuous shocks,
 The stable earth, the deep salt sea,
 Around the old eternal rocks.

Celtic Christians valued the natural environment for its own sake. They valued times of quiet in solitary and often wild places, where they could read Scripture, meditate and pray. Because they lived close to the natural environment, it is not surprising that Celtic Christians discovered the immanence of God. Their poetry often echoes those Psalms which speak of God in nature (e.g. Ps. 19, 89, 98) suggesting a similar spiritual process at work. The following extract from a poem in the Celtic psalter is attributed to St Columba in Iona:

Delightful it is to stand on the peak of a rock, in the bosom of the isle, gazing on the face of the sea.

I hear the heaving waves chanting a tune to God in heaven; I see their glittering surf.

I see the golden beaches, their sands sparkling; I hear the joyous shrieks of the swooping gulls.

I hear the waves breaking, crashing on the rocks, like thunder in heaven. I see the mighty whales ...

Contrition fills my heart as I hear the sea; it chants my sins, sins too numerous to confess.

Let me bless almighty God, whose power extends over the sea and land, whose angels watch over all.

Let me study sacred books to calm my soul; I pray for peace, kneeling at heaven's gates.

Let me do my daily work, gathering seaweed, catching fish, giving food to the poor.²

The final stanza makes it clear that the writer's life was firmly rooted in the everyday. The prayers of the Gaelic oral tradition, collected by Alexander Carmichael, provide further evidence for the everyday relevance of Christianity in Celtic times. "Birds, beasts, fishes and insects figure largely in the old lore of the people. All the live creatures with which they came into contact ... they were accustomed to regard with an observant and intelligent eye."³

In their artwork, too, the Celtic Christians expressed their love of nature and their close attention to detail. For example, the magnificent illustrated pages of the Lindisfarne Gospels⁴ are alive with animals and birds, which, although highly stylised, can easily be compared with actual domestic and wild species. The accuracy of some of the morphological details indicates that these

were based on close observation of locally available subjects.

The distinctive Celtic cross can be interpreted as Christ redeeming the whole of the earth or creation. Some of the massive carved crosses of western Britain and Ireland display birds, animals and plants. Perhaps they served as visual aids for outdoor worship and emphasised the unity of God, humanity and creation.

Legends abound concerning the close relationship between many Celtic saints and animals or birds. St Cuthbert's encounter with otters, as he prayed in the sea, is widely quoted, as is the story of a blackbird nesting in St Kevin's outstretched hand while he was at prayer. On Iona, St Columba instructs a monk to care for an exhausted heron and a horse weeps at his imminent death. On Inner Farne, St Cuthbert orders birds to stop raiding his crops and destroying his roof, while he befriends "Cuddy's" (eider) ducks and prevents mainlanders from stealing their eggs. St Columbanus persuades a bear to leave its cave so that he can use it for prayer. On his Atlantic voyages, St Brendan makes many observations of fish, whales and birds. Behind all these legends surely lies a groundswell of truth: Celtic Christians observed and loved the natural world and as a consequence their faith was deepened.

TRINITARIAN SPIRITUALITY

Celtic spirituality is emphatically trinitarian. Prayers invoking the name of the Trinity abound, leaving us in no doubt that Celtic Christians were "orthodox", even to the point of being pedantic. Perhaps their insistence was a reaction to the pagan animism that they were trying to replace and a protection against the evil spirits who they believed were opposing their evangelism. There is also the possibility that pre-Christian Celtic religion recognised triadic symbols and it aided evangelism to Christianise them.⁵

The contemporary Western view of nature is predominantly Augustinian: Christ came to redeem a fallen humanity living in a world spoiled by sin, where the created things were tainted by evil. This view has tended to overemphasise the place of humanity in Christ's redemptive work, leaving the environment to fend for itself, and we find it hard to disagree with the words of Professor Lynn White: "Especially in its Western form, Christianity is the most anthropocentric religion the world has seen. In absolute contrast to ancient paganism and Asia's religions, it not only established a dualism of man and nature but also

Celtic Christians believed strongly that the earth and all its wonders provide the key not just to establishing the existence of God but also to finding out more about him.

insisted that it is God's will that man exploit nature for his proper ends."⁶

By way of contrast, the Celtic tradition has a more "eastern" bias, espousing a more positive outlook on the human condition and on creation, seeing them as immature and incomplete rather than intrinsically evil. Christ is the saviour who perfects both and lifts them up to God. Thus it was the practice of Celtic Christians to Christianise some aspects of pagan religion. "The pagan Celts had enormous respect for the natural world and took great care not to pollute water supplies or unnecessarily damage trees. They retained this attitude of reverence and respect for nature when they became Christians."⁷

One reason for the historical prevalence of the Augustin's view was his triumph in debate and by decree over Pelagius, a Celtic theologian. Their disagreements covered a wide spectrum of theological issues, including the fallen state of nature.⁸

LESSONS FOR TODAY'S CHURCH

In conclusion, it is pertinent to ask whether knowledge of Celtic spirituality is helpful in dealing with contemporary environmental issues. There is a need to place all contemporary movements that seek to care for the environment within a gospel framework. This in essence is what our Celtic forebears did by espousing natural theology. "They believed strongly that the earth and all its wonders provide the key not just to establishing the existence of God but also to finding out more about him."⁹

The theologians of the Celtic church were down-to-earth, and it seemed quite obvious (natural) to them "that if you are in touch with creation, then you are in touch with its creator".¹⁰ David Adam contrasts this attitude with that of many Christians today who do not seem to be thrilled by nature at all. He and others see in today's church an indifference to environmental issues, which continues the cerebral Augustinian approach of separating the sacred (worship, Scripture) from the profane (the world and its spoiled, created things).

David Adam is one of many Christians to discover that meditating on natural things (a stone, a flower, an apple, the soil, for example) not only brings him into God's presence but also deepens his appreciation of and sensitivity towards the environment. He respects his fellow creatures.¹¹

This approach helps to introduce us to the deeply held conviction of John O'Donohue that we need to

rediscover "belonging". Reacting to our privatised, consumerist society he believes that "in this postmodern world the hunger to belong has rarely been more intense, more urgent ... Part of the reason we are so demented in our modern world is that we have lost the sense of belonging on the earth." In his view, part of the remedy for our dementia lies within Celtic spirituality, because it is uncluttered and not enclosed within ecclesiastical walls and bound up in thought, word and ritual.¹²

O'Donohue would have us meditate on landscape because "there is an ancient faithfulness in nature. Mountains, fields and shorelines are still to be found in the same places after thousands of years".¹³ By now some readers may want to ring alarm bells warning us of the dangers of New Age heresy. However, those who have discovered the immanence of God in the natural environment will want to thank him for our Celtic inheritance and copy the Celtic church in bringing the gospel into New Age worship and thought. It may be that many will consider O'Donohue's position is too unorthodox, but he is to be applauded for wanting to bring, literally, a breath of fresh air into today's stuffy church.

There can be no doubt that Celtic Christianity was Christocentric. "Creation, though splendid with its own vitality, is nevertheless always *creation*, perceived in relationship with the creator. And this was not a distant, aloof creator but Christ the creator – and friend and comforter."¹⁴

Jesus urged his disciples to study closely the birds of the air and the wild flowers (Mt. 6.26–28), and the extensive use of natural history in his parables makes it clear that he followed his own teaching. Jesus knew and the Celtic church rediscovered that God is to be found in nature. Nor should this surprise us because it is the same God given energy that set the world in motion that revealed God to us in Jesus Christ (2 Cor. 4.6). Our final destiny in Christ is inextricably caught up with God's purpose for the whole of creation. The final salvation of the environment depends on our acceptance of salvation for ourselves (Rom. 8.18–25). ■