

THE RESURGENCE OF THE CELTIC SPIRITUAL TRADITION IN THE  
CONTEMPORARY ERA: AN INVESTIGATION INTO ITS DEVELOPMENT AND  
USE AS A TOOL FOR THE PROVISION OF AN ALTERNATIVE CHRISTIAN  
SPIRITUALITY IN TIMES OF RELIGIOUS CRISIS

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## **SYNOPSIS**

The current rise in interest in the Celtic Christian tradition has produced a number of publications about the Celtic Church, Celtic Christianity and Celtic spirituality. An analysis of these writings indicates that the authors are continuing a process of re-inventing a tradition for the needs of the present day. This tradition is traced back to its beginnings in the 6th Century in Britain and is seen to re-emerge throughout the centuries in times of crisis which often coincide with times of paradigm shift.

Through analysis of the development of the Celtic Tradition in the early material of Gildas and Bede and the contemporary publications on Celtic spirituality the purposes of the authors are determined and it is shown how they use the tradition to address the spiritual needs of the contemporary culture. The presentation of the Celtic Tradition, by the contemporary authors, shows that it is presented as a spirituality that resonates with the perceptions of reality of the Post-modern era.

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## **INTRODUCTION**

## 1.1. Celtic Spirituality

It must be clear to all who peruse the bookshelves of Christian and Theological works, or who read review articles that the word Celtic is an important aid to selling a title<sup>1</sup>. David Dewey in his article "Mixed Bag of Celtic Titles"<sup>2</sup> says "The number of books on Celtic spirituality is increasing almost exponentially". He is not alone in making such a statement, for many recent books and articles on Celtic Christianity or spirituality make similar statements about the increasing interest in all things Celtic<sup>3</sup>. The modern Christian seeking to find new material for spiritual exercise or for use in public worship has the difficulty, not of finding material claiming to be Celtic, but of selecting from the array of anthologies of ancient and modern prose and poetry. Whereas some years ago, most were content to limit the Celtic Christian heritage to St. Patrick's Breastplate, and a few Irish and Welsh tunes in the hymnbooks sung occasionally on Sundays, today there is an avid search for the Celtic in everyday life.

Interest in the Celtic heritage is not confined to the Church. Indeed, as is so often the case, Christian circles seem to be following the trend set elsewhere. Contemporary interest in things Celtic has led to the development of a large industry catering for the Christian and the non-Christian alike. Celtic artefacts, knotwork, crosses, clothing, and pottery are part of the attractions for the modern tourist who ventures anywhere in Britain that is prepared to claim a Celtic heritage. And there are many places willing to make that claim. Apart from the obvious geographical areas of Wales, Ireland, Scotland, Cornwall, and the Isle of Man, much of Northumberland, Cumbria and the Midlands of Britain are reasserting their Celtic heritage as well as their Anglo-Saxon heritage<sup>4</sup>. Indeed the resurgence of interest in the Celtic traditions and history of Britain seems to be nation-wide with a similar interest expressed by any who wish to claim some Celtic connection elsewhere in the world.

It seems that any article or book labelled with the word Celtic will be a good commercial enterprise for it will exploit the ready interest in the subject. The great advantage to the publisher and retailer is that the word Celtic is difficult to define and means different things to different people because it can be an emotive word that speaks of such things as racial and religious roots, of oppression and suppression of people and thought, or of a

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<sup>1</sup> For example Esther De Waal: *A World Made Whole* published in 1991 (London, Harpercollins) was republished in 1997 as *"Celtic Light"* (London, Harpercollins).

<sup>2</sup> Dewey D. *Mixed Bag of Celtic Titles*, Baptist Times 16th November 1995, p 17, also Esther De Waal wrote "The Celtic Heritage has become a favourite topic for writers and speakers, and new books and articles, anthologies and translations are appearing all the time." *Christian*, Summer 1992, p 2

<sup>3</sup> For example Sheldrake assumes that there is a great interest and raised the question "How are we to explain the present fascination with Celtic Christianity and Spirituality?" Sheldrake P. *Living Between Worlds: Place and Journey in Celtic Spirituality*, London, Darton, Longman & Todd, 1995, p 2. Simpson R. *Exploring Celtic Spirituality: Historic Roots for our Future*, London, Hodder & Stoughton, 1995, in his preface writes "It should not surprise us therefore to find a growing interest in the life and witness and teaching of the Celtic Church because it weaves together all the strands of [the quest for our roots] p IX. Davies and Bowie open their book with "Recent decades have witnessed an extraordinary revival of interest in the Celtic inheritance of Britain and Ireland." Davies O. and Bowie F. *Celtic Christian Spirituality: An Anthology of Medieval and Modern Sources*, London, SPCK, 1995, p 1.

<sup>4</sup> This is illustrated by the celebration of 1400 anniversary of British Christian heritage taking in the Celtic and Roman heritage of Britain. For example the material produced by English Heritage such as "England's Christian Heritage".

romantic attitude to the created order. It may speak of a past that has been lost in the modernisation of society and of a paradise that somehow could be regained.

When the term is put together with Christianity or spirituality then it can suggest a radical challenge to the contemporary Christian order. It may represent a challenge to the institution or structure of the Church and so be a model for dissent, or it may be a challenge to Christianity itself by resurrecting a much older form of religion, a primal religion for Europe, or an attempt to reconstruct the Christianity of Post-Roman Britain as a model for the present era.

Research into the history of the Celtic Church in Britain before the 11th Century has often centred around the need to discover the institution and structure of the Church, its liturgy and rituals<sup>5</sup>. The most well known event of the Church in the early medieval period is the so called "synod of Whitby" which is traditionally presented as a clash between two different church structures and institutions. Underlying this interpretation of the events is the assumption that there was a unified Church in Britain before the coming of Augustine to Canterbury which represented a unique, more primitive and more contextualised Christianity for the British Isles<sup>6</sup>. And consequently this contextualised expression of the Church was therefore lost, or at least heavily suppressed for the next millennium. An appeal, then, of Celtic Christianity is an assumption of its authenticity in antiquity and of a "missing link" between the present day expressions for a British identity and the pre-Christian religions of these islands, which it is often assumed must have influenced the form of Christianity known as Celtic<sup>7</sup>.

The resurgence of interest in Celtic spirituality has led to a growing amount of interest concerning the historical spirituality of church and people of the 5th - 11th<sup>8</sup> century Britain. It has produced much literature purporting to be from these early centuries and writings that are clearly Neo-Celtic. Neo-Celtic can be defined as that expression of the arts (including literature and art) contemporary in nature but claiming to be in the Celtic tradition. Such material is produced by the Iona Community<sup>9</sup> and by writers such as David Adam<sup>10</sup>.

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<sup>5</sup> Warren F.R. *The Liturgy and Ritual of the Celtic Church*, Oxford 1881, drawing on liturgical material from the Gallic Church and elsewhere presents a reconstructed liturgy for the Celtic Church. This work has been influential for subsequent publications, but is suspect in its reconstruction. Hardinge L. *The Celtic Church in Britain*, London, SPCK, 1972 attempts to reconstruct the doctrines of the "Celtic Church"; Gougard L. *Christianity in Celtic Lands*, London 1932 (republished by Sheen and Ward 1992) attempts to analyse the Church through its monastic structures.

<sup>6</sup> This is true for much of the earlier material including Warren *op cit*, Hardinge, *op cit*, and Gougard *op cit*, as well as more recent works. McNeill J.T. *The Celtic Churches : A History AD 700 - 1200*, Chicago, University of Chicago, 1974, acknowledges that there were differences in the Welsh and Irish traditions, but focuses on the Irish/Scottish tradition.

<sup>7</sup> Such is part of the thesis of Toulson S. *The Celtic Alternative*, London, Century, 1987 and Howard M. *Angels and Goddesses: Celtic Christianity and Paganism in Ancient Britain*, Chieveley Berkshire, Cappall Bann Publishing, 1994.

<sup>8</sup> I include the period to the 11th century because this includes the era of medieval hagiography which produced many of the lives of the Celtic saints.

<sup>9</sup> The "Wild Goose" publications of the Iona Community are resources for worship. In the introduction to the song book *Heaven Shall Not Wait*, Glasgow, Wild Goose Publications, 1987, the compilers claim that the songs will help to deepen the faith of those on the fringe of the Church and who have rejected the institution of the Church and will redress the balance of the modern society so that the spiritual values of the Celtic Church will be rediscovered. These

This resurgence seems to have been inspired by the work of George McLeod<sup>11</sup> and the development of the Iona Community, in the middle of this century. In an attempt to make the church more able to deal with the needs of people particularly in the Urban areas of society, the Iona community was originally set up to train ordinands with an alternative approach to theological education, by working alongside lay people<sup>12</sup>. The theology behind this development was inspired by the concept of the immanence of God interpreted in the doctrine of Incarnation, that was to lead to an understanding of God in all of creation which has been traditionally associated with the Celtic Church and the Celtic people<sup>13</sup>. The development of the Community on Iona together with a growing interest in Christian communities, has led to the foundation of a number of communities throughout Britain as a response to the perceived need for a means of expressing a new communal spirituality in an individualistic age. The Northumbria Community<sup>14</sup>, The Little Gidding Community<sup>15</sup>, The Community of Aidan and Hilda<sup>16</sup> are examples of this development.

The term Celtic, historically and archaeologically, normally refers to the people who from the 5th or 6th Century BC inhabited most of Europe<sup>17</sup> whose culture was eclipsed by the expansion of Imperial Rome. Within the British context it refers to those people who historically inhabited the British Isles from the 2nd Century BC<sup>18</sup> and their descendants now living in Ireland, Scotland, Wales and by association in Cornwall and Brittany. The meaning of the term Celtic is not considered to be a tribal or ethnic name but rather a name of abuse given to these people by others. It may mean "hidden" or "secret", as the Celts were an oral culture and so kept their knowledge and wisdom secret by not reducing it to writing<sup>19</sup> or it may have been a term of abuse and derision used by other cultures, such as the Greek and Roman civilisations, with a meaning like uncivilised, foreigners, different.<sup>20</sup> Within this thesis the term Celtic is not just used in an historical context,

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values centre on the belief that "in Jesus, God took on matter, became part of the world, lit up the ordinary with holiness and did not despise the secular which he came to save." p7.

<sup>10</sup> David Adam *The Edge of Glory*, London, SPCK, 1985, *Tides and Seasons*, London, SPCK, 1989, *Power Lines*, London, SPCK, 1992, *The Open Gate*, London, SPCK, 1994, All have in their subtitle that they are books of Prayers in the Celtic Tradition but all are composed by the author. His understanding of Celtic is the emphasis on the unity of the world and the Divine Presence in it (*Tides and Seasons* p ix) and no false division between sacred and secular (*Power Lines* p xii).

<sup>11</sup> Founder of the modern Iona Community.

<sup>12</sup> McLeod G. *We Shall Rebuild: The work of the Iona Community on Mainland and on Island*, Glasgow, Iona Community, undated, p 13.

<sup>13</sup> *ibid.* p 19.

<sup>14</sup> Founded in response to the need for Christian community identifying with (but not trying to replicate) the Celtic Monastic tradition and the Desert Fathers, the community commits itself, through being Christian in society, to the mission of "rebuilding prayer houses in those areas where the Celtic people and language were spoken and where the gospel once took root (Terry S. *Ask for the Old Paths* unpublished paper, p 25).

<sup>15</sup> Tracing its origins back to Nicholas Ferrer and George Herbert in the seventeenth century, the modern community was founded in 1985. Though not strictly a "Celtic" community it emphasises the need for spirituality to involve a commitment to community. Van de Weyer R. *The Little Gidding Way*, London, Darton, Longman & Todd, 1988.

<sup>16</sup> The community was founded to encourage people to a new spirituality of life and commitment that was revealed in the lives of the Celtic saints. Simpson *op.cit.* p 11 - 14.

<sup>17</sup> Ellis P. Beresford *The Celtic Empire*, London, Constable, 1990, p 9. Laing L. *Celtic Britain*, London, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1979, p 3, suggests the date of the 7th century BC, or earlier.

<sup>18</sup> Ellis, *op cit.*, p 140. Laing *op.cit.*, p 10 considers that the Celtic Culture is evident in Britain in the 5th century BC.

<sup>19</sup> so Ellis, *op cit.* p 9.

<sup>20</sup> so Chapman M. *The Celts*, London, Macmillan, 1990, who considers it a term of abuse, not unlike the origin of the term "Welsh" which means "foreigner" and was used by the Anglo-Saxons about the indigenous inhabitants of Britain that they encountered.

although this is an important aspect of it. Likewise the term is not simply a reference to the people and culture that is found in the Welsh, Irish and Scottish Highland areas of Britain. Rather it will be seen that most of the writers, reviewed in this thesis, would understand it in a much broader way, and also as a more abstract concept, decontextualising it from any historical period and making it refer to a process of thought and self-understanding. As the thesis develops its understanding of this term it will be seen that it inherently means something that is different, an alternative to the status quo, dynamic, changeable and a concept that is both ancient and modern.

Usually the Celtic culture is associated with the rural setting of life rather than an urban one. This association is probably as much to do with the events of the history of Europe as to do with any inherent genetic call to the countryside. A people or peoples who have been systematically oppressed or marginalised over centuries and forced into the less productive geographical and economic areas of the nation may well find an affinity with the land on which they are wholly dependent and develop myths and stories of the past greatness of the people. Such people who from time to time have felt the forces of "ethnic cleansing" ranged against them, may well have developed social and spiritual systems in which they feel themselves close to the Divine, and that they are the objects of Divine favour. A rural and oppressed people may well develop a theology that is in context with their situation, but whether this can be claimed to be unique to a particular group such as the Celtic people, and whether it is an expression of a primal religion and theology is a matter for debate. Connections have been made with the religious beliefs of primal peoples of Africa, North America and Australia<sup>21</sup>.

Another important influence in the growth of interest in Celtic Spirituality has been the publication of the work and research of Alexander Carmichael under the title of "The Carmina Gadelica".<sup>22</sup> This collection of poems, songs, laments and traditions from the highlands and islands of Scotland represents something of the social and religious history and beliefs of the people of these regions. Although many will claim that the material represents a very ancient tradition it is difficult to prove the claim<sup>23</sup>. For example, the material collected by Carmichael exhibits a strong emphasis on the role of Mary as an intercessor and while this may represent the interest in Mary in the early medieval period it may as easily represent the influence of Roman Catholicism as most of his material was collected from Roman Catholics<sup>24</sup>. The material is the property of a very rural, poor, marginalised Celtic people which displays a close tie to the land and to nature in both its bounty and its ferocity. It displays a close relationship with God and a theology that is based on an experience of the Divine in every aspect of life. It is Celtic as it represents the

<sup>21</sup> Duncan opens chapter one of his book with quotations from the Bushmen of the Kalahari desert and Chief Seattle, linking them with Celtic Christianity through a supposed common ecological outlook. Duncan A. *The Elements of Celtic Christianity*, Shaftsbury, Elements, 1992. It is interesting to note that Simon Barrington-Ward in his foreword to Mitton's book makes a comparison with Russian literature. Mitton Michael *Restoring the Woven Cord: Strands of Celtic Christianity for the Church today*, London, Darton, Longman & Todd, 1995, p xi.

<sup>22</sup> Carmichael A. *Carmina Gadelica: Hymns and Incantations Collected in the Highlands and Islands of Scotland in the Last Century*, Edinburgh, Floris books, ed C.J. Moore 1992.

<sup>23</sup> Carmichael makes such a claim associating it with the "Celtic Missionaries" and claiming that some of the poems and hymns may go back to "the cloistered cells of Derry and Iona" and even "the cromlechs of Stonehenge and the standing stones of Callarnis" *op cit.* p 29 - 30. The writer of the Preface agrees (p7). However De Waal *The Celtic Vision: Prayers and Blessings from the Outer Hebrides*, London, SPCK, 1988 p 6 questions this assumption.

<sup>24</sup> Carmichael *op cit.* p 30.



story of one group of the Celtic people, but it does not make it the property nor the theological expression of all the Celtic people of every age and situation<sup>25</sup>.

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<sup>25</sup> Carmichael makes this claim *op cit.* p 29 , and this time De Waal agrees with him. *op cit.* p 6.

## 1.2. The Tradition of Celtic Spirituality

The purpose of this thesis is not to attempt to reconstruct the past. Many others have attempted this task, with varying success. Reconstructing the Church of the 6th - 8th centuries in Britain is difficult because of the limited evidence available. There is some archaeological evidence but this is limited as this period of British history and in particular the Church in Britain of this period generally did not leave much of enduring architecture<sup>26</sup> as the building material preferred was wood not stone. Literary evidence is largely confined to Gildas, Bede and a few other writers of the period<sup>27</sup>. Other literary evidence such as the lives of the saints is either contemporary with the period but claimed by scholars to have been edited in the middle ages, or is from the 11th - 12th century<sup>28</sup>.

Spencer writes in the preface to his book<sup>29</sup>:

... for the lives of many of these saints were written centuries after their death, often embellished to suit the aims of their medieval biographers.

Elizabeth Culling warns that:<sup>30</sup>

The Celtic tradition that we have inherited is in fact more medieval and Victorian than original

stating that if one approaches the descriptions and definitions of the Celtic Church, Celtic Christianity and Celtic Spirituality within a critical framework then much of it will be found to be "wishful thinking"<sup>31</sup>. This may be overstating the case but it expresses the concern that many of the works about the Celtic era do seem to be less than critical.

The purpose of the thesis is not to attempt to reconstruct or define what is Celtic theology, or to build a Celtic theology for today. Indeed the method of the thesis precludes such a aim, for it will be shown that different authors will define the concept of the Celtic Church or Celtic Christianity according to the needs of the time and context in which they are writing. They will define Celtic Spirituality, Celtic Christianity and the Celtic Church in ways that they feel appropriate. This will be demonstrated in Section Three of the thesis. The majority of documents, ancient and modern, relating to and describing Celtic

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<sup>26</sup> Thomas A.C. *Early Christian Archaeology of Northern Britain*, Oxford 1971, and Laing L *Celtic Britain* Routledge & Kegan Paul, London, 1979, p 154 - 155.

<sup>27</sup> Other material includes the letters and penitentials of "Gildas", which may not be the work of Gildas, the Lindisfarne Gospels and other fragments of texts (see McNamara M. *Celtic Scriptures: Text and Commentaries*, in Mackey James P. *An Introduction to Celtic Christianity*, Edinburgh, T & T Clark, 1989).

<sup>28</sup> Doble G.H. *Lives of the Welsh Saints*, ed. Evans D. S. Cardiff, University of Wales, 1993; Sharpe R. *Medieval Irish Saint's Lives: An introduction to Vitae Sanctorum Hibernae*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1991; although some of the lives are considered to be more contemporary with their subject, e.g. The Life of Saint Columba by Adamnan, and the Life of St. Samson of Dol.

<sup>29</sup> Spencer R. *A Guide to the Saints of Wales and the West Country*, Lampeter, Llanerch, 1990. p5.

<sup>30</sup> Culling E. *What is Celtic Christianity?* Nottingham, Grove publications, 1993, p 6.

<sup>31</sup> *ibid.* p 3.

Christianity are not dealing with history but with spirituality and are not concerned with the spirituality of a previous age but the spirituality of their own age.

Mackey<sup>32</sup> expresses the understanding that the Celtic Christianity of the early centuries was little different to the Christianity found in the rest of Europe. The uniqueness of Celtic Christianity was that it is a good example of early and rapid contextualisation, where Christianity was absorbed into the local culture and the local culture assimilated itself to Christianity.<sup>33</sup> Mackey may describe some distinctive elements<sup>34</sup> but he refuses to be drawn into providing a definition for Celtic Christianity. Sheldrake's definition is a comparison with the institutionalised Christianity<sup>35</sup>

[Celtic Christianity] seems to embrace a more contextual, grounded, varied yet uncomplicated, messy, even chaotic faith and spirituality than the conventional institutional forms.

So far in the discussions, we have used the terms Celtic Church and Celtic Christianity. Yet these are largely unacceptable terms because they have little concrete meaning. Some would say that they are false concepts<sup>36</sup>. They would claim that there was no Celtic Church, if by that is meant an organised institution or denomination. Likewise the use of the term Celtic Christianity would imply that there was a particular recognisable form of Christianity that was distinct from other forms such as the term might be used today to speak of Protestant Christianity<sup>37</sup>. It could be noted that it is also used today to define ethnic types of Christianity such as African Christianity, but this is also a misuse of the term as while there may be some distinctive aspects that we can call African, there is also a great variety of Christian expression that would be included in this term. The Church in the Celtic areas of Britain in the 6th to 8th centuries certainly appears to have developed its own distinctive marks and features, but these would be no more than a contextualising of the Christian faith. The Celtic Christians are never described by Bede as being anything other than part of the World-wide Church and holding the same beliefs, accepting episcopacy and even recognising the Bishop of Rome, to some degree. The differences that are encountered in the Celtic era are more differences of expressions of the faith, lifestyle and context. Therefore the term Celtic spirituality is a much more acceptable concept as this expresses its distinctiveness and diversity. As shall be seen, it is not a faith system nor a set of doctrines, as this suggests a fixed order. Rather it is the opposite of this, being dynamic, flexible and a model of easy contextualisation.

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<sup>32</sup> Mackey J.P. *An Introduction to Celtic Christianity* Edinburgh, T&T Clark, 1989.

<sup>33</sup> *ibid.* p 3f.

<sup>34</sup> *ibid.* The distinctive elements he mentions include the concept of the nearness of the spirit world, and the presence of the spiritual in all things and at all times.; the reality of the natural world and unity of the material and the spiritual; the expression of the life and death of Jesus in all things; and the inherent nature of the Celtic to wander. Yet one must ask the question of whether Mackey has selected these distinctive elements because they may seem to be the most appropriate for the present British context?

<sup>35</sup> Sheldrake P. *op cit.* p 3.

<sup>36</sup> for example, Wyn Evans J. rejects the term and concept of Celtic Church in his research into the Church in Wales, as yet incomplete and unpublished.

<sup>37</sup> D.Davies *The Ancient Celtic Church and the See of Rome*, Cardiff, William Lewis, 1924, is happy with the use of Celtic Church and Christianity in this way.

The search for Celtic spirituality as it is understood and expressed today is generally related to the historic context but there is a growing interest and research into the continuance of the Celtic spiritual and intellectual heritage to the present day. Such scholars as Allchin<sup>38</sup> recognise that there is a Celtic Tradition, which is found and expressed in literature and in faith experience. This thesis becomes part of the search for and understanding of the development of the Celtic Tradition as it explores expressions of Celtic Christian Spirituality and discusses how the spiritual tradition is used as a vehicle for missionary purposes, and as a means of developing a contemporary spirituality for the needs and concerns of the age which is an alternative to the contemporary institutionalised Church. The late twentieth century has been defined as Post-modern where the culture is seen to have rejected religion but is more concerned for the spiritual than has been seen previously in this century<sup>39</sup>. Religion as a metanarrative is rejected and in its place the search for alternatives is essentially part of the eclectic nature of the consumer society that resonates with the process of the Celtic tradition. Therefore the development of new spiritualities which may be termed Neo-Celtic, can be an alternative expression of faith that is unconcerned with institutions and denominations but with the realities of a personal spiritual life.

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<sup>38</sup> Allchin. A.M. *Praise Above All: Discovering the Welsh Tradition*, Cardiff, University of Wales Press, 1991 and *God's Presence Makes the World: The Celtic Vision through the Centuries in Wales*, London, Darton Longman & Todd, 1997.

<sup>39</sup> Recent studies and surveys have indicated that experience is more formative for faith than doctrine. e.g. Finney J. *Finding Faith Today*, London, Bible Society, 1992.

## 1.3. Method

This thesis is dealing with the resurgence of the Celtic Spiritual Tradition in the contemporary era. As such it is concerned with the understanding of the Tradition in the present time. The material that has been selected for analysis and study is therefore first of all restricted to that which has been published during the last ten years<sup>40</sup>. This can be understood to be a period of change, both socially and religiously and therefore a period of crisis. Further as the thesis will show, the Celtic Spiritual Tradition is inherently a popular tradition, and so the texts selected are those that are readily available in Bookshops and therefore part of the popular press. Third, the thesis is concerned with Christian spirituality, and so all the texts used are those that are clearly seen to be within the Christian context and dealing with the Celtic Tradition from a Christian perspective.

The analysis of these texts will show that they can be approximately classified into different types of texts, each having a particular purpose and aim. Within this study they are classified into the following categories: Introductions to the subject of Celtic Christian spirituality; Anthologies of ancient and modern material; Texts dealing with single issues, such as ecology; Reconstructions of the Celtic Tradition for the contemporary era some of which attempt to produce a new religion, while others attempt to provide an alternative Christianity; Texts which include worship material that is truly contemporary and so referred to as Neo-Celtic.

The analysis will attempt to provide a description of the purposes and aims of the authors, some of whom clearly state their aims, while others are more discrete. The aims and purposes are seen to be largely related to each author's particular, and sometimes personal, contexts, prejudices and concerns. With the purpose understood, the research will endeavour to assess the alternative spirituality that each author presents and to describe how the Celtic Tradition has been constructed and used to further the aims of that author and the published work.

Analysis of the material will enable a construction of the characteristics of Celtic Spirituality which each author highlights, and a comparison and compilation of these will lead to a general definition of the contemporary understanding of the Celtic Spiritual Tradition and how it relates to the issues of the late 20th century Christianity and Christian mission. This is presented in the conclusions of Section Three. This approach will also indicate the selectivity of the authors, but above all will show how the Tradition is used, re-interpreted and developed in the process. This method will involve the deconstruction of the published material and as such will help to understand how the author has used the Tradition and material available, and whether the original context of the material is considered in the process or whether the Tradition is simply a resource for the construction of a new spirituality and tradition that can be labelled "Celtic".

The tools used for this analysis are broadly those of literary criticism, deconstructing the material, to expose the selectivity and creativity of the author. It is not dissimilar to the

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<sup>40</sup> The period appears to begin with the publication of Toulson's book in 1987 (Toulson S. *The Celtic Alternative*, London, Century, 1987). The previous era of publications being the 1950's.

methods and tools of Biblical criticism. However the thesis also explores the use of the process and method, not looking at the images used, but how they are used, not looking at the building material but how the building is constructed.

The contemporary material is understood to be a resurgence and reconstruction of the Celtic Tradition. Evidence for the use and re-interpretation of the Tradition can be found throughout British history, and a very brief overview is given in Section Four<sup>41</sup>. However, it is important to investigate the beginnings of the Celtic Spiritual Tradition, to show that the present material is a re-invention. Consequently the first part of the study investigates some of the writings of Gildas and Bede as they present and interpret the Celtic Tradition. Again, due to pressure of space, the analysis is limited to Gildas's "The Ruin of Britain" and Bede's "History of the English Church and People". A similar method and similar tools are used on these texts and it will be seen that these two authors have a similar purpose and use a similar process seen in the contemporary texts. They are, in this respect as "Post-modern" as the present authors.

The first section of the thesis will show that Gildas, and later, Bede were also writing at times of great change, and using the Celtic Tradition to produce a contemporary spirituality. They, therefore become a model for, as well as the beginning of, the development of the Celtic Spiritual Tradition. Hence it is important that the connection is made between the beginnings of the tradition and the present resurgence.

Finally, the last chapter briefly critiques the whole process to show that the methods being used can be described as Post-modern. Following a brief description of the precepts of Post-modernism, the similarities between the process of the development of Contemporary Celtic Spirituality and Post-modernism are discussed. The method of the thesis can to some extent, therefore, be considered to be Post-modern, which would lead to the conclusion that Neo-Celtic Spirituality is Post-modern. However the thesis is not concerned with such a judgement, but with the analysis of the authors' material and intentions as an investigation into the use of the Celtic Christian Tradition.

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<sup>41</sup> Unfortunately there is insufficient space to deal in any detail with the development of the Celtic tradition through the Middle Ages to the present day, but this could be the subject of a further study.

## **2. THE BEGINNINGS OF THE TRADITION**

## 2.1.The Golden Age of Gildas

Most attempts at describing the beliefs of the Celtic Christian peoples of Britain begin with a reconstruction of the history of the origins of Christianity in Britain<sup>42</sup>. This may mention such stories as the arrival of Joseph of Arimathea to Glastonbury by which William Blake was to be inspired, but generally starts with the martyrdoms of Alban, Julian and Aaron, and goes on to speak of the British Bishops of the Roman era who attended various Western Synods. All this attempts to provide evidence for a well established Church in Britain during the later Roman period. The rehearsal of this early material evidence has become almost essential to any introduction to the telling of the Celtic Christian story. One can only assume that the modern writers, through this literary device, wish to give some greater authority to the material that they produce, but in reality they are only continuing a trend and tradition that is first seen in the writing of Gildas. His work, the *De Excidio Britanniae* (D.E.B.) is, perhaps, the first to do this and therefore has set the trend for the ensuing 1500 years.

### 2.1.1. Outline of the Book

The English translation of the work of Gildas, called "The Ruin of Britain" is divided into three main sections of complaints about and to the people of Britain. The first section is generally called the Historical Introduction from chapters 2 - 26, but it is really a section of complaint against the British people. This section is the most explored and "mined" section of the book as it has been found useful for historical analysis.

In this section Gildas provides an outline of what he calls the history of the British people<sup>43</sup> to the middle of the sixth century. However, to use the term "Historical" can be misleading, for the author is only presenting a background from the past as the setting of his work and it is only later writers and commentators who accept it as history in a modern sense<sup>44</sup>. This section is not history but a work about Christian morals and a major

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<sup>42</sup> For example Duncan A. *The Elements of Celtic Christianity*, Shaftsbury, Element, 1992; Mitton M. *Restoring the Woven Cord*, London, Darton, Longman & Todd, 1995

<sup>43</sup> D.E.B. chapters 2 - 26 deals with the nature and changing fortunes of the people of Southern Britain, that is present England, Cornwall and Wales.

<sup>44</sup> Winterbottom's translation heads the section "The History of Britain" which must be accepted with the same cynicism as the trend of giving titles to section in the modern translations of the Christian Scriptures. Their purpose for describing it as historical is for their own ends of researching the history of the later Roman period in Britain for which there is very little literary evidence. Therefore the D.E.B. has become a major source for historical essays and disputes. Higham (Higham N.J. *The English Conquest: Gildas and Britain in the fifth century*, Manchester, Manchester University press, 1994 p3-4), writes: "Since the eighth century at latest, [the D.E.B.] has been quarried repeatedly by those writing to reconstruct, for whatever reason, the events of the period which separates the collapse of Roman rule in Britain from the emergence of Anglo-Saxon England into history." While recognising that Gildas was not writing a history and indeed accepting that he had misunderstood some of the sequence of events even at a relatively recent time to him, the work is generally taken as history. The error that this can bring is illustrated by one example from the work. Gildas understood the building of both the Antonine and Hadrian walls to be a response to the invasion of the Picts in the early fifth Century. (D.E.B. 15:3, 18:2). While some scholars try to interpret these statements as implying a rebuilding or fortification of the walls, it is important evidence that Gildas either did not know his history or was exploiting history for his own purpose. Morris (Morris J. *The Age of Arthur 350 - 650*, London, Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1993 p ?) states that the D.E.B. is a personal reflection but then continues to treat it as history : "[Gildas'] judgement and his interpretations are his own, but



indictment against the British people as a whole, exposing and analysing their weak spiritual nature.

The second section, often known as "The Complaint against the Kings" from chapters 27 to 65: 2 is a tirade against five of the British Kings of Gildas' day. Their nature, morals and rule are analysed and judged before proceeding into a lengthy section (Ch 37 - 65: 3) of scriptural passages used to challenge the Kings in their faith and life. This analysis of the five kings or Tyrants Gildas calls history<sup>45</sup>, but it is a history with a purpose. Possibly influenced by the approach of the writers of the Books of Kings of the Old Testament, they are judged not by their rule or success in war but by their moral virtues, and obedience to God, all of whom fall woefully short of expectations<sup>46</sup>.

But Gildas is not undertaking the task of condemnation, but of prophetic duty to bring the leaders to repentance. Assuming that they respect the Church and the Scriptures, the larger part of the section is a long string of quotations from the Bible held together with brief conjunctions and occasional interpretations. The quotations are taken to refer directly to the contemporary situation, which Gildas has equated with the nations of Israel and Judah.

Continuing in traditional prophetic style, Gildas then turns to the Clergy of the Church in Britain and in chapters 66 to the end exhorts the presbyters and bishops<sup>47</sup> in a similar form to his tirade on the kings. The section starts with an "historical" description (Ch 66 - 68), of the state of the Church and the clergy and then continues with examples from the scriptures from chapter 69 to 109. The conclusion to this extensive sermon is a brief prayer for the faithful clergy<sup>48</sup>, but there is no prayer for the Kings or for the people of Britain.

### **2.1.2. The Setting of the Book**

The D.E.B. is a work presented to the leaders of the Church and Nations of Britain in the face of the changing social, economic, political and religious situation, of the middle of the 6th century. The book itself is not dated and the author makes no attempt to tie his material to any dating system. The Complaint against the people which contains the majority of "historical" material is undated and the sections are unconnected, being simply piled one upon another. Assuming that the Kings are contemporaries of Gildas<sup>49</sup>, the

the reality of the men, the institutions and the events is not to be gainsayed. His notions of the past are full of misunderstandings, and similar incomprehension pervades many of the texts that Nennius assembles. But they aim, in the Roman manner, to give a factual record. They too apologise for faulty sources; but they do not replace them with polished moral tales." Whatever Morris understands as "the Roman manner", implying that the Romans were historians of great integrity and had no ulterior motives for their writings, the D.E.B. may not be a "moral tale" but it is certainly a work about Christian morals and not history.

<sup>45</sup> D.E.B. 37: 1 a "tearful history"

<sup>46</sup> Attempts to find out why Gildas chose these five and did not include other kings and rulers of Britain may be of academic interest, and part of an attempt at historical reconstruction, but the purpose of their inclusion is that Gildas understands them to be Christian and therefore judges them according to these standards. They are thus condemned.

<sup>47</sup> D.E.B. 69: 1

<sup>48</sup> D.E.B. chapter 110

<sup>49</sup> The Life of Gildas by Ruys, although a later document of the 11th century mentions and quotes from the writing of the D.E.B. in ch 1 and ch 19 although does not put a date on it except that Gildas was in his forties.. Gildas is said to have been a contemporary of Samson which would

material can be dated to the 6th century. However not all scholars would accept this so that the dating of the material has been disputed, as has the authorship<sup>50</sup>. The date of the 6th century is supported by the statement that Gildas is living through a period of peace following the Battle of Mount Badon. This period is quite extensive for it is more than a generation long. The generation that lived through the period of fighting between Ambrosius Aurelianus and Badon<sup>51</sup> had died and

an age succeeded them that is ignorant of that storm and has experience only of the calm of the present.<sup>52</sup>

It is therefore clear that Gildas is living in a Britain at peace with its neighbours, but not at peace with itself. The peace from external conflict has brought some prosperity to the British but with it has come a complacency. Having passed through a turbulent history of faith and faithlessness, of persecution and testing, the British people have halted the enemy<sup>53</sup> of the Devil incarnate<sup>54</sup>, but are not willing to complete the mission to destroy the enemies. Thus they are living at a time of prosperity and ease, probably having made a treaty<sup>55</sup> with their enemies, and so denying their Christian heritage. This then seems to be the context that has forced the author to produce his work; a task that, again, in good prophetic tradition he has been resisting.

".. that I kept silent ... as the space of ten years or more passed"<sup>56</sup>

"Therefore, in zeal for the sacred law of the house of the Lord, spurred on by my own thoughts and the devout prayers of my brethren, I now pay the debt so long incurred."<sup>57</sup>

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date him in the .....

<sup>50</sup> The dating dispute centres primarily around the inadequate history presented in the material and in particular around the one date given by Gildas, that of his birth. This section of the material in chapter 26 is generally interpreted as referring to his birth in the year of the victory of Mount Badon and Winterbottom (op cit. p 28) interprets the relevant passage as such: "This [of fortunes] lasted right up till the year of the siege of Badon Hill, pretty well the last defeat of the villains, and certainly not the least. This was the year of my birth; as I know, one month of the forty-fourth year since then has already passed." Wood (Wood I. *The End of Roman Britain: Continental Evidence and Parallels* in Lapidge and Dumville *Gildas New Approaches*, Woodbridge, Boydell Press, 1984, p 23) presents the case for an earlier dating of the book, to be a response to the battle of Mount Badon, and written one month after the victory of the British over the Saxons. The forty years is then claimed to be the period between the victories of Ambrosius Aurelianus and Mount Badon. This seems to be mainly based upon a disputation of the translation of the passage above and reading it as: "From that time until the year of the siege of mount Badon, ... forty three years have passed, as I know, for it is the forty-fourth year since my birth; and now a month has passed (since Badon)." He is able to cite Bede in support of this interpretation (Bede, *A History of the English Church and People*, Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1968 p 58). This however does not allow for a period of peace after mount Badon that Gildas describes as quite extensive for it is more than a generation long.

<sup>51</sup> D.E.B. 26 : 2 clearly says that the generation who experienced the "desperate blow to the island and the unlooked for recovery" is of the past, not the present.

<sup>52</sup> D.E.B. 26: 3

<sup>53</sup> D.E.B. 26: 2 "external wars may have stopped"

<sup>54</sup> So Gildas appears to understand the Saxons "those ferocious Saxons hated by man and God" D.E.B. 23: 1 and "the welcoming of Satan as an Angel of Light" 21: 3

<sup>55</sup> D.E.B. 92: 3

<sup>56</sup> D.E.B. 1: 2

<sup>57</sup> D.E.B. 1: 16

### **2.1.3. Christianity of the British**

Gildas writes because of his concern for the British people<sup>58</sup>. He wants to see a Britain freed from the oppression of the heathen Saxon warlords and restored to its former glory of a Province of the Roman Empire. Consequently his approach to the material is one of Lament, and he is no doubt influenced greatly by the Old Testament prophet, Jeremiah<sup>59</sup> and by the writings attributed to him.

Gildas believes that the British are an important race of people, because he makes the assumption that they are a Christian people. He calls them the "City of God"<sup>60</sup>, "latter-day Israel"<sup>61</sup> and the vineyard that has yielded sour grapes<sup>62</sup>. All these are metaphors from the Old Testament that allows him to equate being British with being Christian, so that whatever the reality the understanding is that the Province having been evangelised during the Roman period was by its end part of the Christian Empire of Constantine. That the people and the nation did not live up to the Christian ideal, is clear in his judgements, but this does not stop them being the people of God. When describing the fate of the British particularly in the East and South of Britain, in the face of the Saxon onslaught he describes the plundering of Britain with the words of Isaiah 74: 7 and 79: 1:

"They have burned with fire your sanctuary on the ground, they have polluted the dwelling place of your name." And again "God, the heathen have come into your inheritance; they have desecrated your holy temple"<sup>63</sup>

The British are suffering because of their immorality, which Gildas considers to be theirs by nature<sup>64</sup>. They are a people that are rebellious, lazy, fickle, and constantly squabbling among themselves, to which can be added in the more contemporary situation of Gildas that they are bad judges of character so that they appoint the wrong sorts of kings<sup>65</sup>, and have become materialistic. They are lazy because they were too lazy to defend themselves against the Romans and even had to be forced into helping build the Northern walls, consequently Gildas calls them "wretched inhabitants"<sup>66</sup>. They were easily led by different doctrines and persuasions, such as the Arian heresy which Gildas links with the rebellion of Maximus, suggesting that the latter is the consequence of the adherence to the heresy and that they are as easily persuaded in politics as in religion<sup>67</sup>. As to their judgement, this is condemned in no uncertain terms in the story of the council chaired by Vortipor that invited the Saxons as mercenaries to defend the British against the Picts and Scots

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<sup>58</sup> Even if he wrote the work while in Brittany (Vitae Gildas by Ruys, ch 19- Hugh Williams (tr) *Two Lives of Gildas*, Lapeter, Llanerch 1990, p 43) this does not negate his concern for the people of Britain, many of whom had sought refuge in Brittany from the difficult political and religious situation in the British Mainland.

<sup>59</sup> Higham : op cit.

<sup>60</sup> D.E.B. 1: 5

<sup>61</sup> D.E.B. 26: 1

<sup>62</sup> D.E.B. 24: 4

<sup>63</sup> D.E.B. 24: 2

<sup>64</sup> D.E.B. 4 : 1

<sup>65</sup> D.E.B. 27

<sup>66</sup> D.E.B. 18: 2

<sup>67</sup> D.E.B. 12: 3 - 13: 2

Then all the members of the council, together with the proud tyrant, were struck blind; the guard - or rather the method of destruction - they devised for our land was that the ferocious Saxons (name not to be spoken), hated by God and man, should be let into this land.<sup>68</sup>

He continues as he looks forward to the section about the five tyrants, to conclude that the past follies continue to be repeated for

Kings were anointed not in God's name, but as being crueller than the rest ... and others still crueller to replace them.<sup>69</sup>

The condemnation of their materialism is found in chapter 21 referring to the period between the defeat of the Picts and the coming of the Saxons. This appears to have been a period of economic upturn in the country's history where the peace led to a prosperity. This passage is an illustration that Gildas wants to "have his cake and eat it" for elsewhere he is nostalgic for the Golden era of Rome with its order and its consequent prosperity. While Roman prosperity may be considered to be good this later period of prosperity is considered to be "fornication"<sup>70</sup> and led to the destruction of the British, because in their prosperity they decided to hire the Saxon mercenaries to defend them. This then was judged a "vice"<sup>71</sup> because of its consequences.

Morality is more than interpersonal relationships. It is for Gildas the very essence of the relationship with God. He could not perceive that there was any separation between faith and ethics, faith and action. Therefore his understanding of the behaviour of the British is inconsistent with their Christian faith. There is no consideration that the actions of the people indicate that they have forsaken the faith, only that they are disobedient. Certainly there is the need to repent but repentance is a return to obedience to God and the Christian Scriptures. Consequent to this judgement, Gildas concludes that the British must be disobedient by nature and of low moral culture.

We read little about the Institution of the Church in the D.E.B. but are given a few glimpses through his "histories" and comments about the priests and the kings. The Church of his day had historically conformed to the institutions of the Roman Church with its orders of priest (presbyters) and bishops. That the Church had been urban based<sup>72</sup> is the general consensus of historians and archaeologists<sup>73</sup> and this is confirmed in the D.E.B. Using the title of "The City of God" to refer to the church is more than simply a metaphor taken from the Bible. It also is clearly linked with the fact that the Church was organised within the Roman civil structure and like the civil administration the major centres of the

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<sup>68</sup> D.E.B. 23: 1

<sup>69</sup> D.E.B. 21: 4

<sup>70</sup> D.E.B. 21: 2

<sup>71</sup> D.E.B. 21: 3

<sup>72</sup> The towns were the place of habitation of the church leaders and priests and the destruction of the towns was the destruction of the church. The mention of the holy altars is evidence of church buildings within the town walls, which were destroyed in the Saxon pillaging. That all should be seen as covered with the blood of martyrs is more evidence of Gildas' equation of the Church and the British people and the close association of the Church and urban life. There is no mention of Christianity in the rural areas, although archaeological evidence shows the presence of probable house churches in villas in lowland Britain.

<sup>73</sup> Thomas A. C. *Christianity in Roman Britain to A.D. 500*, London, Batsford, 1981

church were in the towns. Gildas laments the fall of the Church in the same sentences that describe the destruction of the towns assuming that there is an inseparable link between them.

All the major towns were laid low by the repeated battering of enemy rams; laid low, too, all the inhabitants - church leaders, priests and people alike, as the swords glinted all around and the flames crackled. It was a sad sight. In the middle of the squares foundation stones of high walls and towers that had been torn from their lofty base, holy altars, fragments of corpses, covered (as it were) with a purple crust of congealed blood, looked as if they had been mixed up in some dreadful wine-press.<sup>74</sup>

The rural area is for Gildas both the place of chaos<sup>75</sup> and also the place of refuge<sup>76</sup>, but it does not seem to be the place of the Church. The destruction of the cities has produced suffering for the Church which Gildas compares to the martyrdoms under Diocletian<sup>77</sup>. This passage is one of the very few where Gildas praises the British for their faith in suffering. The destruction of the cities and martyrdoms in his own time are, however, the result of the unfaithfulness of the people, church and its leaders.

He also tells us that the church was divided<sup>78</sup>. What these divisions were is difficult to determine but it suggests that there were different groups within the church, followers of different schools of clergy which he associates with Peter, Judas, Stephen and Nicolas<sup>79</sup>. Peter and Stephen are expressions of the glorious church that truly confesses Christ, and Judas and Nicolas (the heresiarch of the early church of Asia minor<sup>80</sup>) the disobedient church, lead by unworthy and schismatic priests<sup>81</sup> who seem to have a large following

The followers of Judas, Nicolas and Annanias and Sapphira<sup>82</sup> may represent the largest part of the church, for the faithful Christians were possibly the small group<sup>83</sup> of which Gildas was a part and was giving him the support he needed<sup>84</sup> to challenge the major institution of the Church. This group may well be a monastic order for whom the Penance of Gildas was written. Certainly the Lives of St. Gildas<sup>85</sup> attest to his association with monastic orders, and his struggle with the worldly monks. His concern in the D.E.B is with the worldly church that refuses to recognise the value of asceticism and the important role that it will play in the development of the Church in Britain and Europe.

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<sup>74</sup> D.E.B. 24: 3

<sup>75</sup> D.E.B. 25: 1

<sup>76</sup> D.E.B 11: 2

<sup>77</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>78</sup> D.E.B. 69: 1

<sup>79</sup> D.E.B. 1: 11

<sup>80</sup> Rev 2: 6, 15. This could also be a veiled reference to Pelagiansim that had been a major force in the country, as the condemnation of the priests fits well the popular image of the Pelagians concerned for material well being but Gildas makes no mention of this heresy or the intervention of St. Germanus during the 5th century.

<sup>81</sup> D.E.B. 67: 4

<sup>82</sup> Allusion to the story of Anna and Sapphira is found in D.E.B. 1: 12 quoting Acts 5: 9

<sup>83</sup> D.E.B. 65: 1 "...other priests and clerics of my order also" suggests that Gildas was a monk and priest, but that he was part of a small group that had not been influenced by the worldliness of the church.

<sup>84</sup> D.E.B. 26: 3 - 4

<sup>85</sup> The "Vitae Gildas" says: The saintly man built many monasteries....., being a monk he now gathered monks to him. in Williams H. *op cit.* p33

and the rest are counted so small a number that, as they lie in her lap, the mother church in a sense does not see them, though they are the only true sons she has left.<sup>86</sup>

This "small number, the only true sons" is the alternative spirituality that Gildas feels will change the church. It is an alternative to the institutional Christianity that has lost its way through its complicity with political power<sup>87</sup>, wealth<sup>88</sup> and status<sup>89</sup>. The clergy clearly exhibit this interest in power<sup>90</sup> and wealth<sup>91</sup> and Gildas holds them responsible for the decay in the life and faith of the church in Britain. The list of their vices in chapters 66 to 68 is indeed long. It includes the lack of vocation<sup>92</sup> which results in ordination becoming a means to wealth and status, bought from the authorities<sup>93</sup>; a lack of teaching of the faith<sup>94</sup> or celebration of the sacraments<sup>95</sup>; a failure to expose corruption and political injustice<sup>96</sup>. The clergy are Simon Magus<sup>97</sup> who symbolises their immorality<sup>98</sup> and idolatry<sup>99</sup>.

The consequence of such poor leadership is that the people have no means to faith and no example to follow that will encourage them to obedience to God. This is presented as the reason why the country is being tormented by the Saxons, and has slid into such moral decline. The best advice that Gildas can give is:

..if you do not swiftly flee these rapacious wolves of Arabia, like Lot, fleeing to the hills from the fiery rain that fell on Sodom, then, the blind led by the blind, you will fall together into the pit of hell.<sup>100</sup>

In presenting this picture of the Institutional Church Gildas has begun a tradition that the true church and true spirituality is in contrast to the Institutional church and therefore is an alternative Christianity.

Encouraging the people to separate themselves from the leaders of the church could put Gildas in the position of being accused of encouraging schism within the church. We have already referred to the schismatic groups perceived by Gildas in the church, and this

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<sup>86</sup> ibid

<sup>87</sup> Within the British kingdoms the church has been constrained by political power and has become its agent. It is possible that if Gildas is also referring to the church living under the political control of the Saxons the church provides a means for the British to gain wealth and position in a society in which they would otherwise be reduced to serfs and peasants.

<sup>88</sup> D.E.B. 66: 1

<sup>89</sup> D.E.B. 66: 4

<sup>90</sup> D.E.B. 66: 4 They keep them like tyrants

<sup>91</sup> D.E.B. 67: 3; 66:1; 68: 1 note the term bellies may refer to food but is more likely to refer to the general greed

<sup>92</sup> D.E.B. 66: 4, 6; 66: 2

<sup>93</sup> D.E.B. 66: 1; 67: 1 - 2. Note that the phrase : they buy priesthoods ... from tyrants and their father the devil, could well refer to the Saxons as the devil.

<sup>94</sup> D.E.B. 66: 1

<sup>95</sup> D.E.B. 66: 1; 67: 6

<sup>96</sup> D.E.B. 66: 2, 3

<sup>97</sup> D.E.B. 67: 1

<sup>98</sup> D.E.B. 66: 3

<sup>99</sup> D.E.B. 66: 4 - 5

<sup>100</sup> D.E.B. 68: 2

is his defence, that it is the clergy that have caused schism as they have become heretics and unbelievers.

Gildas presents us with a Christianity in Britain that is far from ideal, possibly even heretical. The judgement is not made on matters of doctrine, which are never discussed in the D.E.B. but on the lifestyle, morality and spirituality expressed by the people, but largely by the clergy and the kings as representatives and leaders of the Church. Again Gildas establishes another characteristic of the tradition of emphasising spirituality and experience rather than doctrine. A tradition that the Celtic Tradition continues.

Gildas presents his argument against the Church from a moral standpoint and takes a clear dualistic approach to his discussion. For him the choice is clear: to be obedient to God, who is the "Father of the Saints" or to follow the Devil who is the "ill-omened father of the damned"<sup>101</sup>. This dualism is also expressed in terms of culture and politics, for Roman culture, order, economy and government is considered to be Christian, as Rome is the agent of God, while Saxon hegemony is the manifestation of the Devil.

Roman civilisation and the Christianity of the Roman period is, for Gildas, the model par excellence. He understands Rome, even in its heathen state<sup>102</sup>, to be the agent of God in bringing civilisation, morality, justice, law and order<sup>103</sup>, and ultimately Christianity to Britain<sup>104</sup>. He does not really recognise the barbarity of Roman Imperialism and glosses over the periods of persecution. He contrasts the Roman period of British history to the devastation that is brought about by the Saxon invasion. Gildas is very conservative for without Roman values he sees no future for Christianity. Therefore he presents the "old order" as a "Golden Age" of purity and faith, and so again establishes a tradition that is developed in the Celtic Tradition.

#### **2.1.4. The Purpose of the Writing**

The situation in Britain in the mid 6th Century can be described as one of religious complacency and political manoeuvring. The British kings who should be moral leaders of the people and protectors of the church have set aside the precepts of Christianity and put in their place the ideals of political and personal ambition. The clergy are worse, for they strive to attain the same goals through the abuse of religion. Therefore the Christian religion that once held the people together and probably understood to have brought them victory over their enemies is now, no longer meaningful for the people.

A great multitude has been lost, as people daily rush headlong to hell; the rest are counted so small a number that, as they lie in her lap, the holy mother church in a sense does not see them, though they are the only true sons she has.<sup>105</sup>

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<sup>101</sup> D.E.B. 34:4

<sup>102</sup> In the pre-Christian era they are the noble heathen who by victory and conquest had won the right to rule over Europe. This right was divinely ordained so that they could bring peace and civilisation to a barbarian land so that the gospel could spread. The armies of Rome had the task of stamping the image of Caesar on Britain so that it "should not be rated as Britannia but Romania" (D.E.B. ch 7)

<sup>103</sup> D.E.B. 13, Maximus seems to be the best example.

<sup>104</sup> D.E.B. 13: 1

<sup>105</sup> D.E.B. 26: 3

Gildas does not declare that there is a return to heathenism but that Britain is a nation of disobedient Christians ready to compromise and therefore syncretise with the heathen and demonic political and cultural debased Saxon invaders.

This is the picture that Gildas paints of Britain in the mid 6th century. It is a country in political turmoil and economic and social change and instability. The cause of these changing circumstances is undoubtedly the presence of the Saxon people, but their very presence is the result of the lack of faith of the British people. The solution to the changing times is to return to the golden age of Rome, which for Gildas is the true emanation of Christianity. No doubt Gildas is presenting a very negative picture of the country and he reflects upon his time from a conservative religious stance. There is no concept that the change in politics is a response to the changing paradigm that was bringing the British from the Roman era into the Mediaeval era and that this change necessitated different methods of political rule. The change brings uncertainty and insecurity, in the political and economic order, as the British are "pushed" into the poorer parts of the country and so probably see a general decline in living standards, although they are in a relatively prosperous period. That the clergy were part of the political and social order was anachronistic, yet the only alternative is to be part of the Roman order.

For Gildas, salvation depends on returning to the old order for the Roman civilisation and standards are being lost. Although Rome was as pagan and brutal as the Saxons, he understands them to be the agent of God, which he cannot conceive the Saxons could be. The way to liberty from political and social oppression was a return to the personal piety of the past which is not defined by doctrine but through action. Gildas looks backwards for the Golden Age as a means of dealing with the new paradigm of the changing situation in Europe and Britain. Gildas is attempting to produce a contextualised theology but the only model he has is the past. Therefore he plunders and romanticises this to make it a model for his times. This Golden Age is defined not in terms of Christian doctrine but in Christian ethics or praxis, for his understanding throughout his work is that Christianity is what is seen and done. Faith is expressed and understood through action. Spirituality is lifestyle, morals, and law that is firmly rooted in the inherited traditions of the Roman order.

Being scripturally bound he finds the appropriate passages in the Bible and interprets these in the light of the contemporary situation and the recent past and makes the connection. He almost allegorises the text for the contemporary. His advice is to present a Christianity to the people that is securely based in scripture and is prophetic in nature.

The institution of the Church is important as a model and structure within which the true Christian faith is ordered and defined, but when this has become corrupt it forces authentic Christianity into schism and possibly new forms, such as the nascent monasticism. The Church primarily through its leaders and authorities has the vocation of being an example to the common folk and of teaching and encouraging them in faithfulness.

The book has the purpose of calling people back to the Christianity of the "Golden Age" of Rome, as the model of Christianity for the new age of change and instability. Gildas seems to have set the trend for dealing with Christianity in times of crisis and change. A



concept that is used by Bede and is picked up in the contemporary use of Celtic Spirituality.

## 2.2. Bede and the Eighth Century

The second book of Bede's Ecclesiastical history of the English people starts with the story of the confrontation between Augustine, the Roman apostle of England, and the British bishops at the famous meeting at Augustine's Oak somewhere on the frontier between the land held by the British and that dominated by the Saxons.

This story is in effect the culmination of the narratives of chapter one as an overture to the rejection of the British and their church which takes place at Augustine's Oak. The British are rejected in effect for their heresy of not accepting the authority and superiority of the traditions of the Roman Church which Bede presents as the "Catholic Faith". This is an important stage in the history that Bede writes. It is the end of the first era of the victory of the Roman faith over the faith of the British people. While it would be historically unacceptable to claim that in the 6th century the Roman traditions brought by Augustine had triumphed over the British Church it is certainly the event that sets the path for the next two hundred years of church history in Britain.

The British Church is part of the Celtic Tradition that Bede uses for his own purposes in his Ecclesiastical History of the Church of England. Like Gildas he has his own "axe to grind". Although Bede is considered an historian and he is a major source for his age, the history is not an unbiased presentation of the facts and details of history. The History has become not a history (although like Gildas is an important historical document) but a missionary document to encourage a deepening sense of spirituality among his contemporaries and to be used in the conversion of the remaining pockets of Celtic Christians to Roman conformity. Bede is a Roman in terms of his ecclesiology and allegiance and his history is part of his mission to encourage Roman Christianity on the whole of the British Isles.

The Age of Bede is one of transformation and change. The England of the time of his writing is one that is changing from paganism to Christianity. On the broader horizon it is being drawn again into the European sphere of influence centred spiritually in Rome and with the political and economic consequences. Officially, at least, the nations of England have accepted the authority of the Roman Church and so are within the orthodoxy of the Western Church. Yet not all of England and certainly not all of the Celtic lands have accepted the situation. The Victory of the Roman cause at Whitby (which Plummer claims concisely that Bede "overdid" in his account)<sup>106</sup> indicated for Bede that the Celtic cause was judged as heretical, and therefore anyone supporting the Celtic cause must be an anathema.

He includes among his heroes the royal personages who can expand the borders of their land and so expand Christendom. He also accepts the Celtic Christian leaders (saints) as important people for although he understood Celtic Christianity as a heresy he had great respect for the leaders of the Church. Aidan, for example, is understood as a man of gentleness, holiness and moderation. He had zeal in God, and miracles were attributed

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<sup>106</sup> Wallace-Hadrill J.M. *Bede's Ecclesiastical History of the English People - a Historical Commentary* Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1988, p xxiii

both to the man and his relics. This is powerful stuff that is obviously not experienced in Bede's day because he writes "His [Aidan's] life is in marked contrast to the apathy of our own times".<sup>107</sup> The saints were good examples of a life of faith and Bede implies that in the days before they knew of the "correct" order of Roman Christianity then the differences in practice were unimportant. Thus the past cannot be condemned for its ignorance. This was not true of the contemporary. The piety, faith and love of the saints is no substitute for observance of the "correct" doctrines and practices of Rome. But conformity to Rome is not an excuse for the neglect of good lifestyle which reflects the humble faith. The Church in England has become lax and worldly, and to challenge this Bede uses the Celtic tradition. This tradition is built from the memories of the Church and People, and Bede is able to "colonise" these by presenting the saints as people of faith but without true knowledge. Their faith is good but their knowledge is to be discarded.

Bede uses his history for a purpose, a mission to his contemporary society. It is a writing to encourage the people back to true Christianity which must be both Faith and Knowledge. Faith is illustrated by the life of the saints while Knowledge is the knowledge of "the decrees of the Apostolic See"<sup>108</sup>. Indeed in the preface to his work he writes:

For if history records good things of good men, the thoughtful hearer is encouraged to imitate what is good: or if it records evil of wicked men, the devout, religious listener or reader is encouraged to avoid all that is sinful and perverse and to follow what he knows to be good and pleasing to God.<sup>109</sup>

Clearly, Bede is stating that he selects material for his history with the purpose of encouraging people to a deeper spirituality. This is his mission and the purpose of his missionary documents. He appropriates history as a salvation history to be a tool for conversion to Roman Christianity and an encouragement to a deeper spirituality in the new age of Europe.

### **2.2.1. The British Celtic Tradition**

In writing the first book of his work, Bede first concerns himself with the British Church and develops the tradition of that church. The British are for Bede, and for the purpose of this thesis, those inhabitants of Roman Britain who by the time of Bede had been either pushed into the areas which are known today as Wales and Cornwall, or have remained in the lands controlled by the Anglo-Saxons and have become subject to them. They are essentially the descendants of the people to whom Gildas addressed his work.

Therefore it is appropriate that Bede starts with the rehearsal of the pre-history of Britain as he has received it from Gildas. This history is the history of a British people who are disobedient, rebellious and complacent in their faith and the work of God for the salvation of their land and people. Bede is strongly influenced by Gildas and largely reproduces his material. However he does rewrite the narrative and in places is able to add additional

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<sup>107</sup> Bede H.E. 3: 5 p 148

<sup>108</sup> H.E. 3: 3, p 144 - 145

<sup>109</sup> H.E. Preface p 33

information from other sources, most probably Anglo-Saxon sources. The additions include an extended version of the story of St. Alban, the story of the Pelagian heresy and the visits of Germanus, and additional information about the Saxon peoples and the invasion of Britain.

These stories serve to illustrate that the British had a history of diversity from the "Catholic faith". The story of Alban shows that the Christian faith had been firmly planted in Britain during the period of imperial Rome and through the martyr's faith. Paganism and heresy are challenged. The faith that was brought to Britain and was strengthened by the martyrs of the 3rd century was not firmly rooted in the British people, so that they became easy prey to heresy. The first heresy that Bede highlights is the Arian heresy. This affected Britain as much as the rest of Christendom, yet it is noteworthy that Bede implies that while the rest of the Church was infiltrated by this heresy, Britain welcomed it.

Unlike Gildas, who omits the history of the Pelagian heresy<sup>110</sup> Bede now moves on to the story as another illustration of the fickleness of the British people. The heresy is introduced in chapter 10 presenting Pelagius as spreading a teaching both "noxious and abominable"<sup>111</sup> and in contradiction to the "Catholic" faith expounded by Augustine of Hippo. It is worth noting that this is the first time that Bede has used the term "Catholic" which he will use as a synonym for the Roman Church tradition. The Church in Britain required the intervention of the Church of Rome in the form of Germanus to defeat the heresy and purge the British of their waywardness. This motif of the defeat of paganism and heresy in the British Isles becomes one of the major themes of Bede's history. What is played out in the story of Germanus is continued through the next two centuries. Paganism and heresy are defeated by the intervention of the Catholic Church from the continent.

It is a short step to the story of the Augustinian mission to England that will bring the true faith of Rome to defeat the paganism of the Anglo-Saxons and the heresy of the Celtic Church in Britain. The story of the coming of Augustine, is included in the first book, but of course is a period of history later than the writing of the history of Gildas. Yet Bede cleverly understands it as the consequence of the story that Gildas relates in his history.

#### 2.2.1.1. The Augustinian Mission

The Augustinian mission is an important fulcrum of the book and the history of the English Church because it embodies the essence of the ecclesiastical problem of Britain, that the Church of Rome was accepted and welcomed by the pagans of the Island but it was rejected by the indigenous Church. The story of the Gregorian mission to England is related in the light of this experience.

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<sup>110</sup> Although note that Gildas may have referred to it very obliquely in ch20: 3

<sup>111</sup> *ibid.* p 49

Book one culminates in the story of Gregory organising the mission to England to convert the Pagan peoples of the Island of Britain. Augustine is selected to head the mission but he and his companions are reluctant because they are afraid of the pagan English<sup>112</sup>

For they were appalled at the idea of going to a barbarous, fierce and pagan nation, of whose very language they were ignorant.

Yet the reality for the missionaries appeared to be very different. Bede does not tell us that they were received with open arms, but they were received by Ethelbert and given hospitality. Once he has met with the mission on the Isle of Thanet he is convinced that the missionaries are genuine and although he does not convert to Christianity he allows them to preach to and convert the people of Kent unhindered<sup>113</sup>. With his permission Augustine re-establishes the Church in Kent using the remains of an early Church. This together with the letter from Gregory<sup>114</sup> instructing him how to organise the Church in Britain, indicates that they are attempting to re-establish the church of the late Roman period in Britain, based on the Roman civil administration with Bishops at the ancient cities of London, and York<sup>115</sup>.

In the attempt to re-establish the Roman Church in Britain, Augustine is given the directive to work with the British Bishops, and according to the evidence that Bede produces, to have authority over the indigenous Bishops, and therefore by implication to have authority over the whole church of the islands<sup>116</sup>. Bede, then leads his readers into the story of the meeting between Augustine and some representatives of the British Church at Augustine's Oak<sup>117</sup>. This is, for Bede the culmination of the conflict between the British Church and the Roman mission, just as he presents the synod of Whitby as the decisive confrontation between Celt and Roman. The retelling of the story of Augustine's Oak introduces the debate about the dating of Easter, the obstinacy of the British in maintaining their traditions<sup>118</sup> and their refusal to join in mission with the Romans<sup>119</sup>. The

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<sup>112</sup> *ibid.* 1: 23, p 66

<sup>113</sup> His actions must have been influenced by his Christian wife, Bertha, the daughter of the Frankish King Charibert. Bede recalls how Bertha had brought with her Bishop Liudhard, as her chaplain (H.E. 1: 25 p 69), but there is no evidence that either Liudhard or Bertha made any attempt to undertake a mission to the people of Kent. Wallace-Hadrill (Wallace-Hadrill J.M. *op.cit.* p 32. Also see Higham N.J. *An English Empire: Bede and the early Anglo-Saxon Kings*, Manchester, Manchester University Press, 1995 p 192, who warns of the danger of putting too much emphasis on the political power of Ethelbert's marriage) notes that Ethelbert was probably under the political control of the Merovingian Franks, and therefore as Augustine had had the support of the Franks he was politically obliged to treat the mission gracefully. Whatever the reason, he is presented as a pagan who respects the Christian religion.

<sup>114</sup> H.E 1: 29, p 85

<sup>115</sup> *ibid.* The plan to establish sees at London and York, together with the see of Canterbury has often been considered to be a plan of providing bishops for each of the three English Kingdoms of Kent, Mercia and Northumbria (Higham, 1995, *op cit.*), but there is insufficient evidence to indicate that this was a political reality in the late 6th century. The historical evidence suggests that Britain had not by this stage arrived at the stability of three kingdoms but was still in the political struggles of a number of smaller kingdoms for domination.

<sup>116</sup> H.E 1: 29 p 86

<sup>117</sup> H.E 2: 2. Note that this is not a synod or a meeting between the Roman envoys and the Church in Britain, but it is a meeting between Augustine and some representatives of the Church in one British kingdom. However Bede uses the story as representing the situation between the British Church and the Roman envoys as a whole.

<sup>118</sup> H.E 2: 2 p 101. "But despite protracted discussions neither the prayers, nor the advice nor the censures of Augustine and his companions could obtain the compliance of the Britons, who stubbornly preferred their own customs to those in universal use among Christian Churches.

dispute is not so much about the issues discussed, but the underlying understanding of authority and holiness, which is related to the expression of culture and theological concepts. The British understood holiness and righteousness in terms of wisdom and personal humility while the Romans looked for demonstrations of power. This is clearly brought out in the story of the British bishops consulting the hermit and their attitude to what they consider the arrogance of Augustine, the new-comer, remaining seated.<sup>120</sup>

### 2.2.1.2. The British Error

The consequence of this failure to join with the Roman Church and convert the Saxon peoples, was for Bede the rejection of the British Church. Like the Israelites of old and in the Pauline tradition of the rejection of the Jews for their failure to recognise Christ<sup>121</sup>, Bede presents the British Church as erroneous and condemned. His inclusion of the defeat of the British forces at Chester, is the evidence for their rejection. For not only is this a military defeat, but the church is defeated as well. The monks of Bangor who had come to pray for British victory are considered by Ethelfrid as combatants, calling on their God for help and so are the first to be massacred.<sup>122</sup>

[Ethelfrid] said "If they are crying to their God against us, they are fighting against us even if they do not bear arms." He therefore directed his first attack against them, and then destroyed the rest of the accursed army...

Bede's treatment of the British and their church and traditions, presents them as the real pagans, and not the Anglo-Saxons. The British are those who reject Augustine, the "true faith and traditions", and who are said to refuse to attempt to convert their enemies to the Christian faith. Because of this failure they are rejected by God and defeated by the Saxons, having to live on the margins of the islands of Britain, and subject to the Saxon race. Of all the people of Britain the British people are the only ones to have refused to conform to Rome by Bede's day; the others having accepted the teaching and authority of Rome. Bede then concludes<sup>123</sup>

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Augustine then brought this lengthy and fruitless discussion to a close."

<sup>119</sup> But Augustine presented a further problem for the British church. He was the representative not only of the Pope and the Roman Church that was seeking for a unity of Western Christendom, but he came from the Kingdom of Kent and was supported by Ethelbert. He represented the enemies and oppressors of the British, and to submit to him and recognise his authority would have been to recognise the authority of the Saxon Kingdoms, which the tradition of Gildas had portrayed as the Devil incarnate. So surely behind all the facades and the debates is the problem of racial hatred which was even manifested in the official history of the Church in Britain that the British are recorded as having no interest in trying to convert their enemies, the Anglo-Saxons (H.E 5: 23 p 331). However it is worth noting that there is a suggestion that British bishops and monks continued to live and work in the English Kingdoms for some time, for when Chad needed to be consecrated he found two British Bishops in Wessex. Although these Bishops may have been "Cornish" it does show that there was co-operation between the English and the British Church (ibid. 3: 28 p 197, and note also the letter that Aldhelm wrote to the Britons under Saxon control encouraging them to conform to the Roman traditions, suggests that these may have been Cornish or other groups still practising their British Christian traditions in England in the 8th century).

<sup>120</sup> ibid. p 102

<sup>121</sup> Romans 11: 17 - 21

<sup>122</sup> ibid. p 103

<sup>123</sup> ibid. 5: 23 p 331-2

The Britons for the most part have a national hatred for the English, and uphold their own bad customs against the true Easter of the Catholic Church; however, they are opposed by the power of God and man alike, and are powerless to obtain what they want. For, although in part they are independent, they have been brought in part under subjection to the English.

Bede comments<sup>124</sup> that Cadwalla allied with Penda to defeat Edwin and ransack Northumbria, which by then has converted to Christianity. Penda was a pagan and therefore Bede can understand his actions, but Cadwalla was Christian (albeit the deviant British form of Christianity) and therefore he finds it difficult to understand his actions in Northumbria. It is a theological problem for him, for the British were subject to the English, and this rebellion against God's people is a rebellion against Christ<sup>125</sup>.

In this way Bede uses the British Celtic tradition to show its error, heresy, disunity and refusal to undertake mission. Here is a picture and a warning to his readers, that those who follow ways of "error" and traditions and doctrines outside of Roman conformity are rejected by God. The events in history, the military and political defeats<sup>126</sup>, and the miracle stories<sup>127</sup> are evidence of the power and authority of Rome. Their error causes them to be the instruments not of evangelism, but of the destruction of Christianity. Cadwalla defeats Edwin and then goes on to destroy the Christian kingdom of Northumbria. This new Christianity is not allowed to establish itself but has to wait for revival through the Iona mission and all the problems that will ultimately bring. So following Gildas, Bede presents his readers with a tradition and he uses this tradition to encourage a new commitment in the Church, through fear and judgement. For it is the British who suffer through their rejection of the true faith, the English come back to faith through the Iona mission and become part of the universal Church, with its assurance of salvation.

### **2.2.2. The Iona tradition**

Having dismissed the British Church as an enigma Bede moves on to deal with the other section of the Church in Britain which is relevant to Christian England. He is really only concerned with the Scots and Picts in as much as they are related to the work of Columba and Iona. For it is the influence of Iona over Northumbria and later East Anglia and Mercia that is pertinent to Bede's history of the English Church and people.

The Scottish Church is first encountered in Chapter 19 of Book Two. The story of the conversion of Northumbria through the work of Paulinus and Edwin's final decision to accept the faith of Christianity culminates in the letter of Pope Honorius. This allows Bede to relate the contents of other letters from the Pope. One of these is his letter to the Church at Iona which deals with the matters of the dating of Easter and the rise of Pelagianism in the country. Bede returns to the debate of the dating of Easter, but he finally disposes of Pelagianism in this chapter and does not return to it in his history.

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<sup>124</sup> H.E. 2: 20 p 138

<sup>125</sup> *ibid.* "[Cadwalla] had no respect for the newly established religion of Christ".

<sup>126</sup> Bede records the first defeat in the story of the victory of Ethelfrid over the British at Carleon, H.E. 2: 2 p 103

<sup>127</sup> For example Augustine heals the blind man H.E. 2: 2 p 101

The purpose of this chapter, however, is not to deal with these issues but to give a picture of the Scottish Church as deviant from Rome, yet at the same time acknowledging the authority of Rome. The Church of Iona is part of the deviant Church in Britain and suffers from the same false teachings which we have already encountered in the British Church. Unlike the British Church, though, the Scottish Christians are agents of God, not the Devil, and so are treated with greater respect. The distinction is made clear through a number of factors which develop aspects of the Celtic Tradition.

First, the Scots convert to the Roman rites in the eighth century. Although the British do convert some while later, Bede is writing before this time, so for him the British remain deviants. Hence in contrast to the British, the Scots repent of their errors. It is these errors that are addressed in chapter 19. The errors include the influence of Pelagianism<sup>128</sup> that still pervades the Church in Bede's day, and the dating of Easter. Bede records that the Pope writes in his letter:

learned that certain persons are trying to revive a new heresy from an old one  
... that they refuse to observe our Easter on which Christ was sacrificed.<sup>129</sup>

The use of the word "our" is interesting in that it implies that Rome acknowledges that there are different ways of calculating the date, and that these different ways are in use throughout Christendom. The letter does not claim that there is only one acceptable method of calculation as Bede does elsewhere. The discussion about Pelagianism presents it as a doctrine denying the concept of the sinfulness of humanity.

The Synod of Whitby<sup>130</sup> is the pinnacle of the narrative of the Bede's history of the Church in England although it needs to be noted that it was only really a synod that concerned the nation of Northumbria. The Synod of Hertford<sup>131</sup> is the first mentioned by Bede, that seems to involve representatives of all the English Church. It is at this synod that the church declares its unity, accepts the dating of Easter and regulates for bishops, monks and clergy. The Synod of Hatfield<sup>132</sup> is the opportunity for all the English nations to proclaim their Catholicity and conformity to Rome, and by inference confirm the decision of the Synod of Whitby. Although Bede gives the impression that it is at Whitby that all of England rejects the Celtic observances, it is probably not until A.D. 680 that his decision is made. Whitby is given its status because it is in the narrative of this event that Bede details the discussion.

The dispute centres not so much around the discussion of the way in which Easter should be calculated but about the authority of the two traditions. Colman and the Celtic party place their authority in John the Apostle, and the agreements of the Council of Nicaea.

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<sup>128</sup> H.E. 2: 19, p 137

<sup>129</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>130</sup> A.D. 664. H.E. 3: 25 p 185 - 192

<sup>131</sup> H.E. 4: 5 p 214 - 216

<sup>132</sup> The Synod called in preparation for the Council of Rome, is the opportunity for Bede to express the orthodoxy of the Church in Britain and spell out what that means in terms of doctrines and practices. H.E. 4: 17 p 234 - 236. It is noteworthy that following the Synod and the Council of Rome, that Bede records that John, arch-cantor of Rome is sent to Britain to "Teach the proper observance of festivals" and to make a report to Rome on the state of the church. H.E. 4: 18 p 236



Wilfrid, representing the Roman party places his authority in Peter the Apostle, and the continuing authority of the councils of the Church. He presents the Roman position as superior, not only on account of the authorities he cites, but that the more modern methods of calculation are better, because it represents greater wisdom and because it is accepted by all the Church<sup>133</sup>.

The outcome of the Synod is that the church of the Iona tradition refuses to accept the wisdom of the modern church and prefers to maintain its traditional doctrines and practises. It is therefore driven from the land of Northumbria, until it can come into conformity when Egbert convinces them of their error. This is the point at which the Celtic Church comes to maturity and the Roman Church can accept the benefits of the spirituality of the Celtic tradition. While it is presented as a confrontation between the two churches in which the Roman tradition prevails, its result is the visible unity of the Church and Bede uses it to express that through that unity the spirituality of the Celtic saints is exemplary.

The second factor is that Bede believes strongly in a Salvation History<sup>134</sup>, and the monks from Iona are part of the salvation history of the English People. God used them to bring the Northumbrians, Mercians, East Saxons and East Angles to Christianity and therefore they are the agents of God not evil<sup>135</sup>. As such their errors in the pre-Whitby era can only be attributed to ignorance. Recalling how they calculated Easter, Bede writes<sup>136</sup>

But being barbarous and simple, they had not learned when this first day after the Sabbath, which is now called the Lord's day, should occur.

and of Aidan he says<sup>137</sup>

He had a zeal for God, but not according to knowledge

which he repeats again in the final version of the story of the conversion on the Columban Church.<sup>138</sup>

Third, Edwin, king of Northumbria, is instrumental in the conversion of his nation, both through the mission of Paulinus and the mission of Aidan. His political actions had religious consequences. His marriage to Ethelberga is the most obvious move in his political career that enabled Christianity to be brought to the North. Edwin was a Christian in conformity to Rome and he encouraged Paulinus to convert the country to Roman Christianity. However this conversion was not lasting. His political action of defeating Ethelfrid and reclaiming the Northumbrian throne was the unwitting move that brought Iona Christianity to Northumbria. For while Edwin was on the throne the sons of

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<sup>133</sup> This concept of universal acceptance is an overstatement.

<sup>134</sup> Higham p 16 - 17

<sup>135</sup> It is interesting to note how Bede deals with a similar situation where Cadwalla is the originator of the actions. He defeats the apostate Eadflin, which is also the action of God, but he has no praise for Cadwalla.

<sup>136</sup> H.E. 3: 4 p 147

<sup>137</sup> H.E. 3: 3 p 144

<sup>138</sup> H.E. 5: 22 P 328

Ethelfrid were sent to Scotland for safety and to Iona for education<sup>139</sup>. It is here that Oswald became a Christian and subsequently when he gained the throne invited Aidan from Iona to Lindisfarne. Oswald, perhaps for Bede, the best example of Christian Kingship, was a Celtic Christian.

Fourth, Bede refers to the willingness of the monks of Iona in the person of Aidan and his successors to evangelise the English and to accept them into the Church as their "grace of charity". For him, it reflects the spirituality of the Celtic Saints, which was a dependence on God and a concern for all people.

Yet, since they did not fail in the fervent grace of charity, they were worthy to learn the full truth of this matter, in accordance with the Apostle's promise, when he said, "and if in anything ye be otherwise minded, God shall reveal even this unto you."<sup>140</sup>

And it is in contrast to his understanding and treatment of the British people and Church.

Lastly, the Scots are converted to Rome by an English Bishop, Egbert<sup>141</sup>, which is highly significant for Bede as it seems to give an authenticity both to the Iona faith and the English faith. The fact that Bede mentions this story of Egbert among the Scots four times is surely a measure of the significance he finds in this piece of history. He expresses it as follows:<sup>142</sup>

This [the conversion of the Scots] seemed to happen by a wonderful dispensation of God's grace, in order that the nation which had willingly and ungrudgingly laboured to communicate its own knowledge of God to the English nation might later, through the same English nation, arrive at a perfect way of life which they had not hitherto possessed. In contrast the Britons, who had refused to share their own knowledge of the Christian Faith with the English, continue even now, when the English nation believes rightly, and is fully instructed in the doctrines of the Catholic Faith, to be obdurate and crippled in their errors, going about with their heads improperly tonsured, and keeping Christ's solemnity without fellowship with the Christian Church.

Bede can condemn the British for their errors but he has to acknowledge the debt to Iona and Lindisfarne, for the long term conversion of Northumbria. Therefore, albeit in retrospect, the Scottish and Northumbrian saints living before the Synod of Whitby are presented as exemplars of the faith, and in fellowship with the English Christians.<sup>143</sup>

#### 2.2.2.1. Aidan and Oswald

King Oswald of Northumbria and Aidan the bishop consecrated and sent by the community at Iona to be the evangelist of Oswald's kingdom are the first encounter with

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<sup>139</sup> H.E. 3: 1 p 141

<sup>140</sup> Phil 3 : 15

<sup>141</sup> H.E. 3: 4 p 147, 3: 27 p 196, 5: 9 p 282 - 4, 5: 22 p 328 - 9

<sup>142</sup> H.E. 5: 22 p 328

<sup>143</sup> H.E. 3: 4 p 147

Iona Christianity in Bede's account. The two people work hand in hand for the conversion of the people to the Christian faith, and are both projected as good examples to be followed. Oswald, like his predecessor, Edwin, is the pious king encouraging and assisting the Church in its work both pastoral and evangelical. Aidan is the faithful and humble monk who has the calling to bring the people to faith. They are presented as the flower of Iona Christianity.

Oswald was converted and baptised in Scotland while he was in exile, so that on his return to Northumbria he immediately embarks on the conversion of his Kingdom. The conversion is undertaken by firstly defeating Cadwalla and ridding the country of his war, tyranny and apostasy<sup>144</sup>, so bringing holiness and peace to the land. Oswald is the pious king who is pictured as praying in front of the cross before he goes into battle<sup>145</sup>. The planting of the cross in the land was a symbol for the people of the new era that had dawned and the new type of kingship that the people would experience. This Christian king is an example and encouragement to his army as he is to his nation as a whole. Having established himself on the throne, he declares Northumbria for Christ and calls for evangelists from Iona. This surely is to be a golden age when Northumbria was to be an open door for the Gospel into England.

Henceforth many Scots arrived day by day in Britain and proclaimed the word of God with great devotion in all the provinces under Oswald's rule, while those of them who were in priest's orders administered the grace of Baptism to those who believed.<sup>146</sup>

His companion Aidan is presented as a similar type of person and an exemplar in holiness. Bede makes use of the contrast between Aidan and his predecessor to stress the holiness of the saint. Indeed Bede makes Aidan his predecessor's accuser pointing out his impatience and intolerance with the English people.

Brother, it seems to me that you were too severe on your ignorant hearers. You should have followed the patience of the Apostles, and begun by giving them the milk of simpler teaching, and gradually nourished them with the word of God until they were capable of greater perfection and able to follow the loftier precepts of Christ.<sup>147</sup>

And so like many who speak up at Church meetings, Aidan was given the job to do. He was to succeed where his un-named predecessor failed. Bede attributes his success to his spirituality. For, together with patience and tolerance he is described as

an inspiring example of self-discipline and continence, and the highest recommendation of his teaching to all was that he and his followers lived as they taught. He never sought or cared for any worldly possession and loved to

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<sup>144</sup> One wonders if Bede over stresses and exaggerates the situation in Northumberland. It was only one year between the death of Edwin and the victory of Oswald, and it seems unlikely that so much destruction could have been achieved in this one year. Therefore Oswald was possibly not so much the bringer of Christianity to Northumbria but its champion and reviver.

<sup>145</sup> H.E. 3: 2 p 142

<sup>146</sup> H.E. 3: 3 p 145

<sup>147</sup> H.E. 3: 5 p 149

give away to the poor who chanced to meet him whatever he received from kings or wealthy folk.<sup>148</sup>

This latter sentence obviously refers to the story of Aidan and the horse which Bede retells in chapter 14<sup>149</sup> which speaks of the piety of Oswy as well as Aidan. The example of piety to be followed must be one of poverty so that the monk-evangelist can meet the people on their own terms. A horse could be a barrier to evangelism as it separates the rider from the ordinary person who is on foot. So Bede continues to relate the piety of Aidan:

Whether in town or country, he always travelled on foot unless compelled by necessity to ride; and whatever people he met on his walks, whether high or low, he stopped and spoke to them. If they were heathen, he urged them to be baptized; and if they were Christians, he strengthened their faith, and inspired them by word and deed to live a good life and to be generous to others.<sup>150</sup>

But the main concern about possessions was that they were not personal. Whatever the saint received he used for others. He distributed his gifts to the poor or he used them to ransom slaves into freedom.<sup>151</sup>

Bede summarises the life of Aidan in these words:<sup>152</sup>

He cultivated peace and love, purity and humility; he was above anger and greed, and despised pride and conceit; he set himself to keep as well as to teach the laws of God, and he was diligent in study and prayer. He used his priestly authority to check the proud and the powerful; he tenderly comforted the sick; he relieved and protected the poor.

While Bede focuses his attention on Aidan it is also clear that Aidan was part of a community of monks, and like Oswald, what the saint did he expected others to copy. So the discipline of lifestyle that Aidan demanded of himself he also demanded of others. Spirituality was not simply a personal thing for the Celtic saints, but something that was shared in community. There were expectations from followers of the saint and therefore it can be deduced that there were expectations of those who claimed to follow Christ.

... for all who walked with [Aidan], whether monk or layfolk, were required to meditate, that is, either to read the scriptures or to learn the Psalms. This was their daily occupation wherever they went;<sup>153</sup>

Known as a man of prayer<sup>154</sup>, and able to foretell the future<sup>155</sup>, he was recognised as a saint whose power extended beyond the grave. Miracles were attributed to him and his relics.

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<sup>148</sup> H.E. 3: 5 p 148

<sup>149</sup> H.E. 3: 14 p 165

<sup>150</sup> H.E. 3: 5 p 148

<sup>151</sup> H.E. 3: 5 p 149

<sup>152</sup> H.E. 3: 17 p 169

<sup>153</sup> H.E. 3: 5 p 148

<sup>154</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>155</sup> H.E. 3: 14 p 165, Aidan predicts the imminent death of King Oswin.

These relics seemed to have healing powers over sickness and disease and gave protection<sup>156</sup>.

Both Oswald and Aidan are the examples of the good Christian king and bishop but can it be inferred that what is specifically seen in these two people is generally seen in all the Celtic Christians? Bede also mentions two counterparts to these famous men, who contrasted so sharply with them, Aidan's predecessor and Oswald's brother Eanfrid. Bede is selective in the use of his material and it needs to be remembered that Bede has the purpose of encouraging spirituality by the use of good examples. He is not documenting the Celtic Church but using the examples of those that suit his purpose. Aidan and Oswald do just that, yet they too have their failings. They did not conform to the rites of Rome. For Bede this is a problem, but as we already have seen he has overcome it in his introduction of Aidan and Oswald. His admiration of the saints is set within a clear statement of his disapproval of their deviant doctrines of the dating of Easter. But this is all that Bede is able to find against him.

I greatly admire and love all these things about Aidan, because I have no doubt that they are pleasing to God; but I cannot approve or commend his failure to observe Easter at the proper time, whether he did it through ignorance of the canonical times or in deference to the customs of his own nation.<sup>157</sup>

This is the only thing he condemns for he goes on to explain to his readers that Aidan was orthodox in all other matters, and

that in keeping Easter he believed, worshipped, and taught exactly what we do.<sup>158</sup>

The "we" presumably meaning the Roman Church of Bede's day.

#### 2.2.2.2. Cedd and Chad

Cedd and Chad were two of four brothers who had been students of Aidan<sup>159</sup> and brought up in the monastery on Lindisfarne. They are therefore fully part of the Iona tradition. Yet it is noteworthy that in the passages about these brothers, Bede makes no reference to the different calculations of the date of Easter. Therefore one must assume that Bede accepts that they conformed to Rome and gives this impression to his readers. Indeed he calls Cedd "English"<sup>160</sup> which perhaps has the overtones of implying that therefore he must be in conformity with Rome.

The story of Cedd includes the evangelism of the East Saxons, the people of Deira and Mercia. However the largest section is about the establishment of the monastery at Lastingham, where Bede has provided an extended description of the way that Cedd

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<sup>156</sup> H.E. 3: 17 p 168 - 9

<sup>157</sup> op cit. p 169 - 170

<sup>158</sup> op cit. p 170

<sup>159</sup> H.E. 3: 24 p 182 the other brothers being Caelin and Cynibil

<sup>160</sup> H.E. 3: 21 p 177

prepared himself and the land for the building of the community. Through prayer and fasting the place is exorcised and made holy.

The Man of God wished first of all to purify the site of the monastery from the taint of earlier crimes by prayer and fasting and make it acceptable to God before the laying of the foundations.<sup>161</sup>

This story not only tells of the asceticism of the Celtic saints but also their concern for purity and holiness. Bede does not explain what the earlier crimes might be. Wallace-Hadrill<sup>162</sup> considers that it refers to evil spirits rather than a pagan shrine, but surely it is as likely to refer to both. The site that Cedd chose was in some "high and remote hills, which seemed more suitable for the dens of robbers and the haunts of wild beasts than for human habitation". This perhaps reflects the Desert tradition found among the Celtic Christians of the eighth century, and as we come to look at Cuthbert will see that the selection of "uncivilised" places was as much a statement of faith and holiness as it was a geographical selection of a place for a monastery.

We encounter Chad after the story of the synod of Whitby as part of the events and consequences of the intrigues of Wilfrid. Bede uses his common literary form again in chapter 28 by contrasting and comparing Wilfrid and Chad. Wilfrid is a priest firmly set within the Roman tradition and the advocate of Rome. Yet he had his upbringing among the Celtic monastic order. Wilfrid's travels on the continent and to Rome seem to have greatly influenced him such that he espoused the Roman cause to the exclusion of the Celtic cause. Wilfrid is the symbol of Rome, with its pomp and status<sup>163</sup> and insistence on the correct rites and institutions. He refused to be consecrated in England because there were only two acceptable bishops in Britain at that time, being Deusdedit, archbishop of Canterbury who died about the time of Wilfrid's consecration and Wini Bishop of Wessex. It is interesting to note that Bede spends little effort on the life of Wilfrid, perhaps because he represents aspects of the Roman Church that Bede considers had led it into worldliness. The life of Wilfrid written by Stephanus<sup>164</sup> is in very marked contrast to the lives of the Iona saints and particularly the life of Cuthbert that Bede creates. Stephanus' work is concerned with church organisation, structure, and the political intrigues that went on. It could be seen as an apologetic work to declare the justice of Wilfrid's many claims and law suits throughout his life. Bede is not concerned with such things. His "lives" are about spirituality expressed in lifestyle, miracles, and asceticism.

The contrast then is made with Chad who was also consecrated as Bishop of York during Wilfrid's protracted absence in France<sup>165</sup>. Wilfrid, the Roman, and Chad, the Celt,

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<sup>161</sup> H.E. 3: 23 p 181

<sup>162</sup> op cit. p 120

<sup>163</sup> H.E. 3: 28 p 197 Bede writes that Wilfrid was consecrated "with great splendour"

<sup>164</sup> Eddius Stephanus: *Life of Wilfrid* in Webb J. & Farmer D.H. *The Age of Bede*, Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1983

<sup>165</sup> Bede considers that it is the long absence of Wilfrid that prompted Chad to be elected as Bishop in his place, but he gives us a clue that these two men may have been part of a political or religious struggle. It is Alchfrid that sends Wilfrid to be consecrated in Gaul, and it is Oswy that selects Chad to be Bishop. Does this reflect an internal struggle within Northumbria between Oswy and his son? Or does it reflect a religious struggle, that despite the outcome of Whitby, Oswy was still supporting the Lindisfarne cause? Bede records that there was a dispute between Oswy and his son Alchfrid saying "Oswy thought nothing could be better than the Scots teaching,

compete for the see of York! Bede does not narrate this struggle and omits vital information so that the story of Wilfrid and Chad becomes confused. That may well have been the situation until Theodore endeavours to sort out the struggle by appointing Chad as Bishop of Mercia,<sup>166</sup> after reconsecrating him according to Roman Rites.

Chad is the humble Bishop who when confronted about his consecration under British rites<sup>167</sup> is ready to reply to Theodore

If you know that my consecration as bishop was irregular, I willingly resign my office; for I have never thought myself worthy of it. Although unworthy I accepted it solely under obedience.<sup>168</sup>

Chad is described as a humble<sup>169</sup>, prayerful<sup>170</sup> person who regularly studied the scriptures and led a holy life<sup>171</sup>. He cannot be presented in any other way, for the Lindisfarne monk is always humble, following the tradition of Aidan. Bede records his virtues as:

continence, humility, right preaching, voluntary poverty and many others<sup>172</sup>

His visions of his own death and the death of his brother Cedd, are also evidence of his spirituality. Bede goes to some length to relate to his reader the type of person Chad was, and this may reflect the fact that he had access to good stories and traditions about the man<sup>173</sup>, but also because through the book he is trying to impart to his readers the desire to follow the example of these worthy Celtic saints.

The story of the death of Chad, which takes up most of the narrative is complemented by the report of Trumbert about the life of prayer of the saint. This gives us a possible insight into another contrast between Chad and Wilfrid, and therefore between the Celtic and Roman traditions. Bede recalls how it is reported that Chad understood that God worked through creation. Bede reports that when there was a wind or gale or thunderstorm, Chad would stop whatever he was doing and turn to prayer<sup>174</sup>. In this passage the adverse weather conditions are not attributed to the devil or to evil spirits as found elsewhere in Bede<sup>175</sup> but to the work of God.

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having been instructed and baptised by the Scots and having a complete grasp of their language. But Alchfrid, who had been instructed in the faith by Wilfrid ... knew that Wilfrid's doctrine was in fact preferable to all the traditions of the Scots." (H.E. 3: 25, p 87). Certainly the evidence shows that Wilfrid is consecrated under Roman rites and Chad by two British Bishops, possibly Bishops from Wales or Cornwall, but possibly from British churches in Saxon lands.

<sup>166</sup> H.E. 4: 3 - 4 p 207 - 208

<sup>167</sup> R.E. Latham *Bede: A History of the English Church and People*, 2nd ed. Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1955 in the notes on this passage H.E. 4: 2 p 207 considers that Chad's consecration would also have been seen as irregular as he was consecrated to the see of York, while Wilfrid was the incumbent, although absent from his see.

<sup>168</sup> H.E. 4: 3 p 207

<sup>169</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>170</sup> *ibid.* p 209

<sup>171</sup> *ibid.* p 208

<sup>172</sup> *ibid.* p 210

<sup>173</sup> Bede acknowledges his source of information about Chad as coming from Trumbert, one of the monks in Chad's community who was also one of Bede's tutors. H.E. 4: 3 p 211

<sup>174</sup> H.E. 4: 3 p 211

<sup>175</sup> cf the story of Germanus' visit to Britain, H.E. 1: 17 p 59

When the monks asked him why he did this, Chad replied: "Have you not read, "The Lord thundered in the heavens, and the Highest gave his voice. He sent out His arrows and scattered them; He shot out lightnings and discomfited them". For God stirs the air and raises the winds; He makes the lightening flash and thunders out of heaven, to move the inhabitants of the earth to fear Him, and to remind them of judgement to come. He shatters their conceit and subdues their presumption by recalling to their minds that awful day when heaven and earth will flame as he comes in the clouds with great power and majesty to judge the living and the dead"<sup>176</sup>.

The weather gives a foretaste and a warning about the day of judgement and so the only response is one of worship and prayer to show one's faith in God. Here again, Bede is making rhetoric and taking the opportunity to use the Celtic tradition of their closeness to nature to challenge the people of his day who may well have a spirituality of Wilfrid. This concept of the Celtic tradition, however is presented more clearly in the Bede's "Life of Cuthbert"<sup>177</sup>, but he does not draw it out in his History.

### 2.2.2.3. Cuthbert

While Bede presents the Synod of Whitby as the climax of the struggle of the English Church, Cuthbert becomes the excellent example of its outcome. He devotes six chapters<sup>178</sup> to Cuthbert, which is a substantial narrative. Only Edwin is given greater coverage, and his narrative includes the life of Paulinus and some letters from the Pope<sup>179</sup>. No doubt this is due to the fact that he had a large amount of information on Cuthbert, both from his own experience and the stories from other people. However it also indicates how much Bede respected Cuthbert for his piety and lifestyle and therefore makes him a central character in his History. It is also clear, in comparison with the "Life of Cuthbert", that Bede has been very selective in the material he has included in the History, and his summary of the Life of Cuthbert furthers his aim of encouragement of his contemporaries to the holy life. Why is Cuthbert so important? Cuthbert is the monk with a strong Celtic heritage, fully within the tradition of Iona and Lindisfarne, and yet is thoroughly Catholic as he is "post-Whitby" and has accepted the authority and traditions of Rome. Cuthbert, then is for Bede the example par excellence of the English Christian.

Cuthbert is presented as a good example of a monk who is concerned both for his own spiritual life and fortune and for others. He is constantly pictured as attempting to remain in solitude for meditation and prayer. Therefore he spends much time on the Inner Farne Island later in his life. Yet in the earlier days Bede recalls that he is a man of the people. He does not elevate himself above the other members of his community when he is elected as Prior of Melrose or Bishop at Lindisfarne. He is a man of the "ancient tradition"<sup>180</sup>, by which Bede is obviously referring to the tradition which pertained in the Celtic Monasteries and indeed which was the early practice of the Roman Mission to England

<sup>176</sup> H.E. 4: 3 p 211

<sup>177</sup> Bede *The Life of Cuthbert* in Farmer D.H.(ed) *op.cit.*, p 41 - 104

<sup>178</sup> 4: 27 - 32. Bede's Life of St. Cuthbert is substantially longer being 46 chapters in length.

<sup>179</sup> It is interesting to note that Bede gives five chapters to Bishop John of Hexham - 5: 2 - 6 who it is understood ordained Bede, and therefore he had a great deal of information on this person as well.

<sup>180</sup> H.E. 4: 27 p 260



under Augustine. This ancient tradition of piety and holiness, reflected the understanding of the early church as reflected in the Acts of the Apostles. Surely this is also a piece of rhetoric, implying that the situation in Bede's time had changed quite considerably. For Bede, no doubt, this understanding of the ancient traditions was a statement of a better spirituality where there was true fellowship and simplicity.

But most of all in the History, Bede presents Cuthbert as the man who challenges superstition, syncretism and evil spirits, and encourages people to trust fully in Christ for "their reward in heaven". Bede uses the opportunity of the plague in 6?? to illustrate the point that the ordinary people were prone to return to the old ways and superstitions in times of crisis. Into this situation comes Cuthbert, a man of the people, who spent time travelling the villages to preach and encourage the people, even going into the distant and mountainous places where other monks feared to go. His missions were successful, partly because he was a good preacher but also because he was a good example and people were able to see him as a holy person in whom they could confide, and to whom they could relate easily. Bede says that he only expected others to do what he was first prepared to do<sup>181</sup> and then leads into the passage that speaks of Cuthbert's virtues:<sup>182</sup>

Above all else, he was afire with a heavenly love, unassumingly patient, devoted to unceasing prayer, and kindly to all who came to him for comfort. He regarded as equivalent to prayer the labour of helping the weaker brethren with advice, remembering that he who said, "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God," also said, "Love thy neighbour". His self-discipline and fasting were exceptional, and through the grace of contrition he was intent on the things of heaven. Lastly, whenever he offered the sacrifice of the Saving Victim to God, he offered his prayers to God not in a loud voice but with tears welling up from the depths of his heart.

To this we could add that Cuthbert is very humble and yet obedient. His humility is expressed through his general lifestyle, but also through his reluctance to accept his election to bishop, and even when he eventually agrees he is able to go to Lindisfarne rather than Hexham. Finally, Cuthbert's sanctity is proven by his ability to predict his death and that many miracles are performed through his relics. Bede states that Cuthbert performed miracles during his life but does not include any in his narrative. To read of these it is necessary to refer to Bede's "life of Cuthbert", to which he refers a number of times<sup>183</sup>.

The work of Cedd, Chad and Cuthbert is evangelistic or missionary, and they are presented as a perfect example of the holy life. All these three have the advantage over their predecessors in that they conformed to Canterbury and Rome. These then are the best of "both worlds", exhibiting the spirituality of the Celtic tradition and having the "knowledge" of the true faith and doctrine of the Roman Church. These saints then, represent for Bede the cleansed golden age of the Celtic Church.

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<sup>181</sup> H.E. 4: 28 p 263

<sup>182</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>183</sup> In the *Life of Cuthbert* in Farmer D,H, (ed) op.cit. Bede refers to the following miracles : prayers that change the weather, ch 3, 11, stopping fire ch 14 , healings ch 30, 31 etc and exorcism ch 15, and also to Cuthbert's closeness to nature in the stories such as the sea otters ch 10, the eagle ch 12, the birds and the barley ch 19, etc.

### **2.2.3. Bede's Use of the Celtic Tradition**

It is clear from the History that Bede has a high regard for the lifestyle of the Celtic Saints, and finds them useful as examples for his thesis. It needs to be noted that he also includes narratives of miracles and holiness of English saints. The longest narrative is that of Bishop John, who exhibits all the characteristics of the Celtic saints. Therefore Bede did not have to include the Celtic saints in the History other than to mention them as part of the history of the coming of Christianity to England. He chose to include them when he could have excluded them and he had good reason to exclude most of them because they followed the practises of Iona and not Rome. This for him was an unacceptable crime, for it did not recognise the authority and teaching of Rome. Yet, the Iona and Lindisfarne traditions redeemed themselves by accepting the outcome of Whitby.

Why was Bede so concerned about the events of Whitby and the central issues of the shape of the tonsure and the dating of Easter? Why was he so condemnatory of those who practised the British and Celtic traditions rather than the Roman ones? Bede is a man of Rome and Rome for him was the symbol of the truth of Christianity. Central to this was the need for a unity of the Church, which was best expressed by the uniformity of Rome. For different Christians to have different traditions such as the tonsure and the date of Easter that exhibited the disunity of the Church, was unacceptable. Bede condemns out of hand the British Church because it refused to be united with the "rest of Christendom" and it is only the outcomes of the Synod of Whitby<sup>184</sup>, Hertford and Hatfield that allow him to show such favour to the Lindisfarne church.

Unity was important, and that unity could only come through the recognition of the authority of Rome, which in itself is authenticated through its antiquity and its catholicity. The antiquity is expressed through the early chapters of the history to show that Christianity in Britain came from Rome and was in conformity both in practice and doctrine with the Roman Church. The work of Paulinus and Edwin is evidence of the priority both historically and theologically of the Church of Rome in Northumbria, and together with the mission to Kent as precedence for the whole of Britain. Yet the history of Britain also contains a period of non-conformity due to isolation from Rome. When the church in Britain is confronted by the Roman tradition in the form of Augustine's mission, he finds it strange that they do not readily welcome the bishop and come back into the fold. He can only explain this strange happening through either ignorance or the work of the Devil. All other expressions of Christianity in Britain eventually accept the claims of Rome and come back to into the mainline, universal, Church.

At the same time Bede struggles with the concept of contextualisation. He finds it unacceptable that different groups of Christians can have different practices, even though it is clear that these have been developed due to local circumstances, and perhaps are more appropriate to the local situation. Yet at the same time he praises people like Aidan and Cuthbert because they break out of the straight jacket of the institution of the church

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<sup>184</sup> Bede ascribes to Oswy's opening speech to the Synod, the statement of the necessity for visible unity - "King Oswy opened by observing that all who served the One God should observe one rule of life, ..." H.E. 3: 25 p 188; yet note that earlier Bede says that under Oswy, Northumbria is happy to tolerate different observances. *ibid.* p 186.

and become one of the people. Through their willingness to break out of the mould, the people of England are brought out of ignorance, superstition and syncretism, into what he understands as the true faith of Christ.

Dealing with all these issues throughout his history, it is surely understood that these were continuing and contemporary issues of Bede's day. While he implies that the problem of Easter and the authority of Rome was dealt with decisively at Whitby and the Celtic problem continued possibly into the 12th century. Likewise the problems of syncretism, superstition and paganism were still a continuing concern for him. Add to this his concern for the state of the Church and the monasteries which had bowed to the pressure of worldliness and ease, Bede has a mighty task in producing his history. The task to prophetically challenge the church into a renewal of spirituality, could best be done by the use of the Celtic traditions. He continually expresses the position that the Roman Church, and therefore the church of his day in England has the true knowledge of the faith of Christianity, and that this is expressed through its traditions, worship<sup>185</sup> and monastic life. Yet it is clear that this is insufficient for the spiritual life.

Bede is dealing with events and issues as if they are wholly historical, yet is it not more likely that he uses this literary device to deal with contemporary issues that were very real and divisive? His purpose and the call of the book is firstly to those who continue in the Celtic tradition of the dating of Easter and the rejection of the authority of Rome, to leave them behind for the better knowledge that has been proclaimed numerous throughout the history of Britain from Aidan, through Germanus and Augustine to his own day. They should follow the example of Cuthbert and conform to Rome for their own well being and for the visible unity of the Church. To those who are in conformity with Rome he reminds them that knowledge in itself is not sufficient and they are challenged to renew their personal spirituality with the zeal of love and humility, while they continue to be part of the Catholic Church. They, too, are called to follow the example of Cuthbert and the saints.

Bede uses and develops the tradition that he has received from Gildas and also the traditions, legends and stories of the Celtic saints together with his own experience of certain of these saints, to produce a Celtic tradition of piety that will challenge the wayward Christians. This tradition which he uses to produce a renewed spirituality is presented as a "primitive" Christianity with an emphasis on personal holiness, faith, piety and prayer. It is a "desert" tradition which can recognise the power of God in creation and use it as a means of worship. Such a spirituality is a practical spirituality that has the power to convert others.

He develops the tradition of the British church as led into error and falling deeper into the clutches of the Devil as a persuasive argument to alert the church of his day of its complacency. The British church refused to accept the traditions of Rome and so it has become the instrument of the Devil. The Iona church was ignorant of the traditions of Rome and yet it had a tradition of holiness and evangelistic zeal. The only way forward for the Church of Bede's day was the combination of the traditions, the personal piety, pastoral concern and evangelistic methods of the Iona Church together with the traditions

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<sup>185</sup> The story of the arrival of John Arch-cantor of Rome illustrates this. H.E. 4: 18, p 236

and symbols of unity and Catholicity of the Roman Church. To this end Bede produces his History of the English Church and Nation, and to this end he uses and develops the Celtic tradition.

### **3.THE CONTEMPORARY EXPRESSION OF THE CELTIC TRADITION**

### 3.1. Overview of the Material

Many books about Celtic Spirituality are being published at present and they can be classified into different types, although one book may fall into a number of the categories. As with any new discipline a number of the books are presented as introductions to the subject and these may provide an overview of the historic nature of the Celtic Church as well as trying to define the theology and spirituality of the Celts<sup>186</sup>. Some authors present their research as an historical reconstruction of the life and institution of the Celtic Church in Britain or one part of Britain. Such an approach may be authentically academic, while the more popular books are perhaps attempting to give their readers some access to their assumed cultural and spiritual roots.<sup>187</sup>

A growing category of books are theological and popular books addressing particular issues such as Green Issues and Feminist Issues<sup>188</sup>. These "Single Issue" approaches draw on the tradition of Celtic spirituality, both in its Christian and pre-Christian forms to give an authenticity to the thesis laid out and concerns addressed. Some authors attempt to deal specifically with the Celtic Church and saints as models of spirituality and make the connection with the present spiritual crisis<sup>189</sup>. Close to this category is the popularity of the anthologies of Celtic verse and prose found on the bookshelves. Much of this is an editing of the material incorporated into the *Carmina Gadelica*<sup>190</sup>, but increasingly includes Welsh and Irish literature as the authors search for new and novel material<sup>191</sup>.

The final category is the truly Neo-Celtic Material which is modern and relates to the modern era and context. Many of the works of David Adam fall into this category as does much of the worship material written and published by the Iona Community. These authors make no claim to be reproducing ancient Celtic art but drawing on their own understandings of Celtic spirituality and emphasising the immanence of God in all things, compose mainly verse that addresses the needs of an urban, post-industrial society.

What, then is the purpose of these writings ?

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<sup>186</sup> These will include Mackey J.P. *An Introduction to Celtic Christianity*, Edinburgh, T & T Clark, 1989; Bradley I. *The Celtic Way*, London Darton Longman & Todd, 1993; Duncan A. *The Elements of Celtic Christianity* Shaftsbury, Element, 1995

<sup>187</sup> Simpson R. *Exploring Celtic Spirituality*, London, Hodder & Stoughton, 1995; Victory S. *The Celtic Church in Wales*, London, SPCK, 1977

<sup>188</sup> For example Bamford C. & Marsh W.P. *Celtic Christianity: Ecology and Holiness*, Edinburgh, Floris, 1986

<sup>189</sup> Sheldrake P. *Living Between Worlds: Place and Journey in Celtic Spirituality*, London, SPCK, 1995; Mitton M. *Restoring the Woven Cord: Strands of Celtic Christianity for the Church Today*, London, Darton Longman & Todd, 1995

<sup>190</sup> Carmichael A. *Carmina Gadelica: Hymns and Incantations collected in the Highlands and Islands of Scotland in the Last Century*, Edinburgh, Floris books, ed C.J. Moore 1992

<sup>191</sup> Van der Weyer R. *Celtic Fire: An Anthology of Celtic Christian Literature*, London, Darton longman & Todd 1990; Reith M. *God in Our Midst: Prayers and Devotions from the Celtic Tradition*, London, SPCK, 1989 ;De Waal E. *The Celtic Vision: Prayers and Blessings from the Outer Hebrides*, London, Darton Longman & Todd, 1988; De Waal E & Allchin A.M. *Threshold of Light : Prayers and Praises from the Celtic Tradition*, London, Darton Longman & Todd 1986 (which includes material from Wales and Ireland); Davies O. and Bowie F. *Celtic Christian Spirituality: an anthology of medieval and modern sources*, London, SPCK, 1996.; Clancy T.O. & Markus G. *Iona: The Earliest Poetry of a Celtic Monastery*, Edinburgh, Edingburgh University Press, 1995.

The Neo-Celtic writings of the present era are generally eclectic drawing together material of the Celtic tradition from different eras and different groups of people, without giving due attention to their context. It is a consumerist approach that whatever is useful is used and what is unhelpful is ignored.

Dewey reviewing the book *Exploring Celtic Spirituality* by Ray Simpson says: <sup>192</sup>

Like many others before him, he selects those aspects of Celtic Spirituality which suit his purposes

and continues

While undoubtedly there is much of value to be learnt from the Celtic saints that is relevant to mission in an unchurched society, it would be a grave mistake to suppose that the author presents us with anything like a comprehensive or objective historical view.

Elizabeth Culling warns that :<sup>193</sup>

The Celtic tradition that we have inherited is in fact more Medieval and Victorian than original

This section of the work explores some of the material published over the last few years with the task of examining the authors intentions in publishing their research, and therefore analysing how the Celtic Tradition is perceived, used and presented to the readers. It is not possible to analyse in detail all the books being published as this would extend the survey too greatly and would become rather tedious in its contents. Therefore I have selected material from each category, but make reference to other material published.

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<sup>192</sup> Dewey D. *Mixed Bag of Celtic Titles*, Baptist Times 16th Nov 1996

<sup>193</sup> Culling E. *What is Celtic Christianity?* Nottingham, Grove booklet, 1993 , p6

## 3.2. Introductions

The only book that is entitled as an introduction to the study of Celtic Christianity is the collection of essays edited by James Mackey<sup>194</sup>. This collection of essays by scholars interested in the field does not have the purpose of introducing the subject by outlining the main points and aspects of Celtic Christianity, or trying to define what it is. Rather it is an invitation to study the discipline and the essays presented only reflect the interests of the authors and do not compile a systematic approach. This is in contrast to the other two texts selected to be part of this section, by Bradley<sup>195</sup> and Duncan<sup>196</sup>. Duncan attempts to be systematic and historical, focusing on the historic phenomenon of the Church in Britain in the "Celtic period" and so attempts to some extent a reconstruction of the Christianity of that time. It is a reconstruction with the purpose of introducing that type of Christianity for today and as the roots of the contemporary Christian faith. Bradley takes a more thematic approach to introducing the subject by reflecting on his experience. He approaches the subject from a sensory division of the material.

Mackey understands that the Celtic tradition, which he calls Christianity, but is more appropriately termed spirituality, is a continuing tradition from the 5th century to the present day. While it has always been a minor tradition within the Christian church, it has never been totally eclipsed from influence in British Christianity, although he postulates that its heritage has largely been relegated to the poetic and literary traditions of the margins of Welsh, Irish and Scottish Highland culture<sup>197</sup>. He also recognises that this tradition has changed and developed over the centuries, through the impact of the Romanised traditions of Christianity, which abandoned the early Church's approach to mission of assimilating the primal cultures it encountered, and instead developed the imperial approach of cultural vandalism and the destruction of individuality and uniqueness<sup>198</sup>. The Celtic culture he understands to be similar to his understanding of the mission of the early church, in that it is one that assimilates other cultures. Consequently this important aspect of the tradition, has enabled Celtic Christianity to absorb aspects of its pagan ancestor, and also its oppressors and used these as vehicles for expressing its own values.

One is then left with the question of what is left of the "original" historic Celtic Christianity, and Mackey would perhaps be prepared to say that little is left except for the tradition which he goes on to define in rather subjective terms.<sup>199</sup>

I think that little harm can be done if I myself attempt to say what I thought to be distinctive and striking and possibly properly Celtic features,... I use no other criterion than that of reverberation - whatever seems to reverberate within some depths of my own Celtic consciousness, as that too has been formed by my own learning and use from my earliest childhood of the Irish language - that repository of a total and ancient culture - and my return to it in

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<sup>194</sup> Mackey J.P. *An Introduction to Celtic Christianity* Edinburgh, T & T Clarke, 1989

<sup>195</sup> Bradley Ian. *op.cit.*

<sup>196</sup> Duncan A. *op.cit.*

<sup>197</sup> Mackey *op.cit.* p 4

<sup>198</sup> *ibid* p 7

<sup>199</sup> *ibid* p 10



later life, when years of feeding upon largely teutonic philosophy and theology began at last to fail to refresh my spirit and was beginning to fail my Christian faith.

Coming at the subject from a disillusionment with mainstream European Christian spirituality he is able to make Celtic Christianity consist of those elements which will serve his purpose in opposing the spirituality that he has found unhelpful and developing a spirituality that will address his perceived needs. It is defined by experience and feelings rather than logic and intellect. This, of course, to some extent draws on the alternative Celtic tradition which is portrayed by the adversaries of the Celts throughout the ages, following the example of Julius Caesar who presented them as non-intellectual; because they had an oral culture and tradition. Turning this aspect of the tradition to the Celtophilic advantage one encounters the anti-intellectualism (Mackey calls it conceptual-analytical<sup>200</sup>) of the present day, and the equation of oral with spiritual, sensual, experiential. However this is a false dichotomy, and is betrayed when authors, like Mackey claim the Celtic tradition is holistic. While recognising that Reformed and Roman theology may be less than holistic because of its overriding emphasis on the cognitive, the Celtic tradition cannot claim to be holistic when it depreciates the intellectual. To some extent he also contrasts the spirit with the intellect and begins to define Celtic Christianity as that which takes the spirit and spiritual presence as a reality.

This then leads to an appreciation of the natural world, the power of God and an emphasis on uncreated grace which is exhibited through the created order. This natural order he understands to be created good and continues inherently good so that the work of the Messiah is not to change creation from sinful to good, but to redeem it from its bondage "under the occupation of malevolent forces"<sup>201</sup> So at once the Celtic Tradition is contrasted with its commonly assumed arch-opponent Augustine of Hippo and presented as an holistic tradition which takes seriously both the spiritual and the material as channels of God's grace<sup>202</sup>, and re-instates Pelagius as orthodox and as a proponent of Celtic theology<sup>203</sup>.

Mackey writes to encourage the study of the tradition so that it can be understood with greater clarity. He is therefore suggesting a new type of research method that works on the principle of perception and imagination<sup>204</sup>, dealing in realities, instead of the Western approach of cognitive-scientific deduction, dealing with concepts.

The essence of Celtic Christianity, for Duncan, is that it is built upon a primal religion, which can be compared to other primal religions throughout the world. The author cites examples from the San<sup>205</sup> of the Kalahari desert, and Chief Seattle representing the North

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<sup>200</sup> ibid p 16

<sup>201</sup> ibid p 16

<sup>202</sup> ibid p 13

<sup>203</sup> ibid p 18

<sup>204</sup> ibid p 16 - 17 So Celtic Christian who in this respect also carried forward their pagan past, seldom wrote "straight" theology. In this also they may have much to offer to a contemporary theological scene which is slowly rediscovering the primacy of the religious imagination..

<sup>205</sup> Also known traditionally as the "Bushman" of the Kalahari. The author is very dependant upon the work and research of Van der Post, although he only lists in the Bibliography one book by this author - Jung and the story of our Time, although Van der Posts work is much more extensive than this.

American Indigenous religions. However one has to be sceptical as to whether Chief Seattle is representative. It is therefore clear that Duncan starts with a romanticised concept of the Celtic people of Britain considering them, tribal, primitive, emotional, romantic and chivalrous<sup>206</sup>, and being "aboriginal" they have a special understanding of life, expressed in myth and poetry rather than history<sup>207</sup>. This could be expressed as non-literary and therefore the author is aligning himself with the ideas of Mackey.

As a Christianity grafted on to a primal religion, the Celtic tradition exhibits a theology that is not dualistic, does not divide the sacred and the secular, good and evil, and at the same time shares much in common with the world religions and the Greek and Roman traditions<sup>208</sup>, through the common Indo-European religious heritage. The importance in stressing that the Celtic heritage is Primal is twofold.

First it provides a working concept of the Tradition as a religion that is concerned with life and existence - it provides a means whereby Human-Nature relationships work<sup>209</sup> and so gives meaning to existence.

Pre-Christian religion is concerned that Nature should keep on working, that crops should grow, wives and cattle be fertile, and the elements remain in order.<sup>210</sup>

Being a form of Christianity uninfluenced by the philosophy and theology of the Medieval and later periods of Europe, it is understood to contrast with Augustinianism, so rejecting the concept of original sin<sup>211</sup>. This is a most fundamental point for the author as he re-invents the Celtic tradition. The movement away from the necessity to deal with sin, to a theology of blessedness brings a different basis for faith, religion and life. Responding to Nature which is inherently good allows the individual to respond to the "natural" in the person because it represents respecting the earth. But the danger of this is that it can lead to the charge of licentiousness.

Because of his emphasis on the need to respect nature he is willing to link Celtic Christianity with the Creation theology of Matthew Fox<sup>212</sup>, and as a consequence says<sup>213</sup>:

Celtic Spirituality is "green" through and through, and quite unselfconsciously. It approaches everything in personal terms, again unconsciously. It was never necessary to articulate the proposition that a personal Creator would be unlikely to create anything that was not - in some sense - a person. There are no "things", for everything is a person.

Secondly it takes British Christianity back to the deepest discernible roots of British religion and culture; back beyond the influences of Roman and Reformation theology to a "popular" religion that has been oppressed and marginalised. In this early form,

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<sup>206</sup> Duncan A. *op.cit.* p 5

<sup>207</sup> *ibid* p 7

<sup>208</sup> *ibid* p 28

<sup>209</sup> *ibid* p28

<sup>210</sup> *ibid* p 29

<sup>211</sup> *ibid* p 55

<sup>212</sup> Fox M. *Original Blessing : A primer in creation spirituality*, Santa Fe, Bear & Co., 1983

<sup>213</sup> *ibid* p 103

Christianity in Britain can be portrayed as a contextualised Religion<sup>214</sup>. It is contrasted with later forms of Christianity, medieval, Roman Catholic and Protestant, which the author understands to have been divergent because of the influence of Augustine and the emphasis on guilt and sin. Celtic Christianity, because it is historically nearer the primitive Church is presented as more authentic.

Celtic Spirituality teaches us a better understanding of our own faith; it stands much closer to the source. All we have to do is to learn from it.<sup>215</sup>

The book takes a broadly historical approach to the introduction to Celtic Christianity, and the chapters rehearse the history of the coming of Christianity to Britain and the clashes with the Continental forms of Christianity brought by Augustine of Canterbury and the later Norman rulers. But the main purpose is to present a Christian tradition that takes the readers back to their religious roots, and can be an alternative to the Protestant and Roman Catholic traditions, where the emphasis is on the "heart not the head"<sup>216</sup> It is defined both through its "primitive" nature and also through its contrast to the major Western forms of Christian tradition, which the author presents as oppressive, and imperialistic.

Bradley approaches Celtic spirituality from a similar perspective to Duncan, but presents his introduction in a thematic way. Although he gives a brief outline of the historical situation, this is not an historical approach, attempting to describe the Celtic Christianity of the sixth century, but describes it in terms of its main aspects, which are relevant to the present time. He defines the Celtic tradition as being:

environmentally friendly, embracing positive attitudes to nature and constantly celebrating the goodness of God's creation. It was non-hierarchical and non-sexist, eschewing the rule of diocesan bishops and a rigid parish structure in favour of a loose federation and monastic communities and included married as well as celibate clergy and were often presided over by women... it seems to speak of a primitive innocence and directness which has much appeal in our tired and cynical age.<sup>217</sup>

Acknowledging that the book grew out of a radio series on Celtic Christianity, it is clear that the work is "popular" rather than scholarly, and as such presents many statements without providing the necessary evidence for them. It is also clear that his starting point is the present age, and so like many authors is searching the Celtic Concept for ideas that he feels will speak to the present religious crisis in Britain.

An important part of the tradition is that the Celtic Christianity that has been passed down, is today seen as a contextualised theology which has relevance mainly to a primitive, rural people

Celtic Christianity was a faith hammered out at the margins. The Celts lived on the margins of Britain, on the margins of Europe and on the margins of

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<sup>214</sup> ibid p 60

<sup>215</sup> ibid p 110

<sup>216</sup> ibid p 101

<sup>217</sup> Bradley I. *op.cit.* p viii

Christendom. They lived close to nature, close to the elements, close to God and close to homelessness, poverty and starvation<sup>218</sup>.

and as such the Celts are considered to have been (still are?) people that are close to the Gospel. The Theology that they produced, is therefore, considered to be a theology from the "underside" because

their story is one of oppression, suffering and progressive marginalisation - the way that was trodden by Jesus in his time on earth.<sup>219</sup>

and so for the author, this becomes an important reason for "listening to what they say".

However this description of the Celts seems to be emotionally charged, rather than built on evidence. Why should they be described as "homeless, poor and starving" simply because they are rural people? Why are they stereotyped as "oppressed, suffering and marginalised"? and why does this make it important that they should be listened to today? If the Celtic Christianity of the sixth century is a contextualised Theology then the real question that needs to be asked is whether it is relevant in a very different context of the late 20th century. Peter Beresford Ellis<sup>220</sup> portrays the Celts as marginalised and oppressed, suggesting that the intent of the invaders of Britain has been genocide of the Celts. Yet this is a view that is being seriously challenged today, and even Duncan alludes to the fact that while the culture of Post Roman Britain was systematically destroyed by invaders, (as indeed the pre-Christian Celtic Culture was destroyed by Roman Imperialism) the people were assimilated into the new "races" of Britain. Consequently the English are considered by some scholars to have as much right to claim a Celtic heritage as the Scots and Welsh. Indeed it seems to be to some extent arbitrary that researchers<sup>221</sup> claim the Highland Scots to be the last vestige of a Celtic Culture, when as Duncan records that this culture was in fact a merging of Norse and Celtic<sup>222</sup>

This contextualised theology is "unashamedly creation centred" which Bradley contrasts with the "sin centred" theology of Augustine of Hippo. Yet this dualistic contrast is overstating the case, for Celtic Christian literature indicates that the Celts took sin very seriously. The penitentials and the lives of the saints witness to this. Creation centred theology leads to an understanding of God as "Lord of Creation" rather than "Lord of History", and so the concept of redemption is challenged.

In so far as there was a distinctive Celtic theology, it too stressed the essential goodness of nature, including human nature, and saw Jesus Christ as one who was sent not so much to rescue the world from the consequence of the fall as to complete and perfect it.<sup>223</sup>

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<sup>218</sup> ibid p 30

<sup>219</sup> ibid p 30

<sup>220</sup> Ellis P. Beresford *Celt and Saxon: The struggle for Britain A.D.410 - 937*, London, Constable 1993 p 100, 242

<sup>221</sup> Hobsbawm E. & Ranger T. *The Invention of Tradition* Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1983, p 16 - 20

<sup>222</sup> Duncan A. *op.cit.* p 71 - 72

<sup>223</sup> Bradley I. *op.cit.* p 52

How does one distinguish between rescuing the world from the fall and perfecting it? The stories of the saints in confrontation with evil forces seen in nature can be interpreted as dealing with a fallen world that need to be put back into good order. The quotations that Bradley makes, indicate the Celts' concern and interest in Nature, but do any of these well rehearsed poems really speak only of the goodness of nature. Praise poetry, which praises the Creator through creation, does not deny the reality of evil and danger in the created order. Certainly the Celtic theology derived from poetry deals with the everyday things, which for rural people inevitably deal with living with the created order, but this does not deny the concept of the fall.

For Bradley the consequences of a "Natural Theology" will lead to the recognition of creation as symbol and sacrament<sup>224</sup> leading to a rediscovery of imagination and experience<sup>225</sup>, a humility in the face of creation<sup>226</sup>, a re-discovery of Pelagius and John Scottus<sup>227</sup> and a search for a deeper holiness of life<sup>228</sup>. This Celtic theology challenges the alienation of people from the natural order due to the influence of technology<sup>229</sup>, emphasises the presence of God in all things and places, to provide an intimacy and presence of the divine which will give the world a new dynamic<sup>230</sup>.

This is all in contrast to the present state of the Western Church, which is being challenged by many new forms of Christianity, of which the re-discovery of the Celtic Tradition is one. Bradley understands Celtic theology to challenge the abstract, conceptual and academic trend of the Western Church and so attacks the Protestant tradition which he considers to be spiritually destructive controlling<sup>231</sup> and culturally imperialistic.

Celtic Christianity did not destroy cultural traditions and roots - it built on them and baptised them. It may have had a strongly ascetic and even austere quality, but it was not puritanical or narrow in its sympathies. Indeed it enthusiastically embraced music, art and poetry.<sup>232</sup>

Celtic Christianity through the use of poetry and the imagination is in contrast liberating. Yet, again Bradley is being over enthusiastic in his dualistic approach, for he also states that the Celtic heritage has its abstract aspects. In the chapter discussing the Celtic stone crosses he explains how they are relevant to the present day:

In the late twentieth century, however, we are much more attuned to primitive and non-representational art and as a result we are in a much better position to appreciate the abstract imagery of Celtic designs than previous generations. Our so called post modern culture may also find it easier to tune into those

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224    *ibid* p 57  
 225    *ibid* p 83  
 226    *ibid* p 58  
 227    *ibid* p 53  
 228    *ibid* p 80  
 229    *ibid* p 103  
 230    *ibid* p 106  
 231    *ibid* p 98  
 232    *ibid* p 118

deeper rhythms and cadences of Celtic spirituality which are expressed in a distinctive style of music.<sup>233</sup>

This musical rhythm being expressed largely in the poetry. But what makes abstract art relevant to the twentieth century whereas Protestant abstract theology is not?

Bradley does present Celtic Christianity not just as an historic phenomenon but as an important reality for the present. It is to be seen as a challenge to the declining Western Church and is in conflict and struggle with it. In essence he is attempting to resurrect the Whitby debate and through an appeal to overthrow the judgement that took place. The jury is now out to reconsider the matter and he assumes that the Celtic cause will finally win the day.

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<sup>233</sup> ibid p 90

### 3.3. Anthologies

Esther De Waal has published four books on her research and understanding of Celtic spirituality (*The Threshold of Light* was co-edited with Donald Allchin). This interest in Celtic Spirituality is a development from her interest in Benedictine spirituality and she has spent a number of years researching the available Celtic material, particularly the collection made by Carmichael which has come to be known as the *Carmina Gadelica*<sup>234</sup>. Her published material has mainly focused on the material from the Outer Hebrides and this has been compiled into the first two books, which are presented as anthologies of material. *Threshold of Light*<sup>235</sup> contains material from Scotland and from Wales, while *The Celtic Vision*<sup>236</sup> is selections from the *Carmina Gadelica* only. De Waal's interest and qualifications for producing these works is not solely related to her academic research of written material. She would also claim to have experienced Celtic spirituality at first hand, having been born a Celt with affinity both to Scotland and Wales. This is important, for her claim is that the search for the understanding of the nature of this Spirituality is not one that can be gained from written sources but one that is a living tradition that must be experienced and absorbed. In the introduction to *Threshold of Light* the authors write:<sup>237</sup>

The Celtic tradition is full of spiritual insight; it touches hidden springs within us, "the part of myself that is older than I". For [De Waal], the possibilities of this exploration had been sensed from childhood. Born into a Scottish family and brought up in the Welsh border country, she had the immeasurable advantage of a childhood and youth spent on the edges of the mainstream.

In this brief statement some important insights are given to the reader about the author's understanding of Celtic spirituality. It is not something that can be researched and read, but something that has to be absorbed and it is related to a particular people who are known as Celtic in origin and nature. No definition of Celtic is given except that it is clear that to be Scottish or Welsh is to be Celtic. We are told that there is an historic and ancient aspect to being Celtic, and to the spirituality related to that group of people. De Waal has the privileged position of having both Scottish and Welsh ancestry and so has the resource of what is commonly referred to today as the "historic experience" of the people.<sup>238</sup>

Celtic Spirituality is therefore perceived to be an historic reality that has come down to the present day from the ancient past. This antiquity is still genuinely found within contemporary Celtic material and so continues the tradition of more than two thousand years. The authors give some indications of what this nature is but wish the readers to understand or discern for themselves by reading the anthologies<sup>239</sup>.

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<sup>234</sup> op cit

<sup>235</sup> Allchin A.M. & De Waal Esther *op.cit.*

<sup>236</sup> De Waal, Esther 1988 *op.cit.*

<sup>237</sup> Allchin A.M. & De Waal Esther *op.cit.* p ix

<sup>238</sup> *ibid* p xiv

<sup>239</sup> *ibid.* p xi

Likewise in the book *A World Made Whole*<sup>240</sup> which is a broader exploration of the "Celtic Tradition" from an historical perspective De Waal writes:<sup>241</sup>

I hope that I have managed to present [the material] in a way that will enable the readers to encounter it, and engage with it for themselves, so that it becomes life-giving on their own Christian journey.

and

My concern has rather been to present the subject in terms of a succession of themes with which readers can identify from their own experience. Here is the Celtic way of seeing the world. It cannot be understood only in cerebral terms; it speaks to the heart, it is closer to poetry, and like poetry, it must remain ultimately elusive.

Understanding that the term Celtic Spirituality would ultimately mean any spirituality related to Celtic peoples and lands, De Waal concerns herself with and confines her writings to Christian material. This seems to be mainly defined in an historic sense in that she excludes from her anthologies material that is "pre-Christian and semi-pagan"<sup>242</sup>. These categories are not defined but illustrated with the example of:<sup>243</sup>

the charms against evil spirits and fairy songs in particular, which are ultimately more of interest to the folklorist.

However the term semi-pagan raises the issue of what is syncretism and what is contextualisation. Is not the Christian both historically and in the contemporary concerned with the presence and consequence of evil, and many Christians believe in the reality of evil spirits? Poetry that deals with these aspects is common in Christianity and would not be excluded from material used in the exploration of Christian verse. Presumably under the definition above, St. Patrick would be excluded as semi-pagan. The Breastplate of St. Patrick concerns itself with protection against evil spirits, although it does not mention "fairies". Yet De Waal does not do this for she also speaks of Patrick as being "contextual" because his use of pre-Christian traditions "would have resonance with his heathen hearers"<sup>244</sup>

This is in contrast to the later work *A World Made Whole* where her definition of Celtic Christianity includes the explanation that it was a different form of Christianity to that found in the rest of Early Medieval Europe because it was developed away from the mainstream of Urban life. The consequence of Christianity coming to a people on the fringes of Europe is that

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<sup>240</sup> De Waal, Esther *A World Made Whole: Rediscovering the Celtic Tradition*, London, Harpercollins, 1991

<sup>241</sup> *ibid.* p 7

<sup>242</sup> De Waal, Esther 1988 *op.cit.* Preface

<sup>243</sup> *ibid*

<sup>244</sup> De Waal, Esther 1991 *op.cit.* p 68



It came out of a people who were not afraid to carry over their earlier pagan, pre-Christian beliefs into Christianity and fuse the old with the new.<sup>245</sup>

From this one must conclude that, by definition, Celtic Christianity and therefore presumably Celtic Spirituality must have at its core the interaction between the pagan and the Christian beliefs and practises. It is therefore contextual and not syncretistic. De Waal must in the end believe that it is a contextualised spirituality because its uniqueness derives from the heritage and nature of the Celtic people and is expressed in terms that are best understood with a strong rural background and not one associated with an academic literary education.

In the *Threshold of Light*, De Waal announces to the reader that an encounter with the Celtic Tradition will lead to a discovery of it. But what is the Celtic Tradition that needs to be discovered?

The material from the Outer Hebrides that is the core of *The Celtic Vision*, but also found in the other works, comes from a context of a rugged landscape and lifestyle. It is "bleak and rugged"<sup>246</sup>. Therefore there is an affinity with the earth and with the "natural" rhythm of life and seasons. The spiritual tradition that rises out of this context is contrasted with the traditions normally associated with the urban institutionalised Christianity of the churches. Consequently faith is not expressed in creeds and formulae or in sacred rituals and symbols, rather it is sung and prayed through the everyday activities of life

It was a praying which responded to, and grew out of their way of life, not one imposed from outside it by an instituted church, even though most of them were Roman Catholic. [They] grew out of their sense of the presence of God as the most immediate reality in their lives.<sup>247</sup>

She uses the picture of the Celtic Cross as a symbol for this different understanding and approach to theology, where the circle represents the world superimposed on the cross of redemption. Hence this is a symbol for the understanding that

God breaks into the ordinary, daily, mundane, earthly ... God informs daily life and transforms it..<sup>248</sup>

The focus of the Celtic tradition for De Waal is that the work of God in the world is to bring it into a wholeness of relationships. This is an approach that highlights reconciliation, and therefore is appropriate for the ecological debate.

God is at work making his world whole. That, finally, is what we gain from a rediscovery of the Celtic tradition. ... A world made whole; a world in which the divides go down, and the barriers are crossed, becomes a world which integrates and heals.<sup>249</sup>

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<sup>245</sup> ibid p13

<sup>246</sup> De Waal, Esther 1988 *op.cit.* p1

<sup>247</sup> ibid. p 4

<sup>248</sup> De Waal, Esther 1991 *op.cit.* p 13

<sup>249</sup> ibid. p 129

This first aspect of the nature of Celtic Christianity is one that the author associates with Indigenous religious traditions and worldviews from across the world, so that she is implying that the Celtic traditions of Britain are the Indigenous ones, and therefore the primal. The world is God's and God's grace restores the whole of human nature and the whole of creation thus bringing Redemption.

From this oneness with the creation the Celtic tradition and worldview does not separate the sacred and the secular. God is concerned with all things and is involved in all things. This is perhaps the most well demonstrated aspect of the material in the *Carmina Gadelica*, and one that the author contrasts (I think unfairly) with the

Puritan legacy that has hung so heavily over much British and American religion, which seems to insist on the superiority of the spiritual and says that all that has to do with the body must be trampled on and denied.<sup>250</sup>

While God can be understood through the eyes of Indigenous spiritualities, it is also clear that the Celtic Tradition upholds an orthodox Christian understanding of God as Trinitarian. De Waal reminds the reader of the three-fold pattern found in pre-Christian Celtic thought and wisdom and this is probably brought over into Christianity so that the concept of God as Trinity was easily accepted. That this represents the Hebridean concern for fellowship is understood, as living and working an isolated life the people no doubt craved for fellowship. That God the Trinity should represent this to the people may be a spiritual concept drawn from a social necessity and so may represent the idea that out of "the temporal order comes a deep sense of the mystery, a sense of what lies beyond"<sup>251</sup> and that the spirituality of the Hebridean people of the last century was grounded in the reality about them. In this sense it is a creation spirituality, and a tradition that draws God into every aspect of daily life however routine or mundane.

It is easy to understand that this was the worldview of the 19th century Scottish islanders, who lived a very rural life, but to claim that this was also the tradition brought down from the hermits of the 8th century<sup>252</sup> is perhaps claiming too much. The author elaborates this in *A World Made Whole* where she sets side by side the poetry of the *Carmina Gadelica* with the stories of the lives of the saints from the early medieval period. Indeed she paints a picture of an old women intoning a prayer in the Hebridean islands, and claims that the tradition of the prayer "may well be in origin as old as the tenth or eleventh century"<sup>253</sup>

This is part of her romanticising the past which interprets the rural worldview as contrary to the urban, that seeks at its heart the accumulation of possessions through the exploitation of the environment. This picture of the Celtic saints in harmony with all creation is the vision that she feels speaks to the needs of the 20th century<sup>254</sup> This vision is illustrated by some excerpts from the "Lives" of the Saints such as the story of Columbanus

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<sup>250</sup> ibid. p 11

<sup>251</sup> De Waal, Esther 1988 *op.cit.* p 14

<sup>252</sup> ibid. p 7

<sup>253</sup> De Waal, Esther 1991 *op.cit.* p 24

<sup>254</sup> ibid. p 80

and the bear<sup>255</sup>, Ciaran and the boar<sup>256</sup>, and Mo Chua and the cock the mouse and the fly<sup>257</sup>, which she cites these as examples of how the saints were in fellowship with the animal world and that they could live in harmony together. However she does not deal with the fact that these relationships are really the relationship of master and servant. The bear is removed from his cave so that Columbanus has somewhere to live and then serves the saint. The boar who helped Ciaran dig the foundations of his hut "stayed on to be his servant". Is not this the state of the understanding of creation that is claimed to have produced the ecological disaster of the present, where creation has been understood to be the servant of humanity?

This romanticism continues in her portrayal of the Celtic monks as people who admired beauty. The evidence, for her, is the great beauty of the Celtic monastic sites, forgetting that they were chosen for their isolation not their beauty<sup>258</sup>. And so to say that they were at home in nature because

These are men who see what lies around them, see that it is good; the ground to be cared for, fruits collected, fish netted, all the practical things for a fulfilling relationship with the earth and preventing escape into a wilderness of their own fantasies. Here is real contentment.<sup>259</sup>

is to read into the texts from the perspective of our contemporary society. The stories of Cuthbert and Columba give us pictures that are far from men being content in nature but rather despising it. The Inner Farne was no "earthly paradise". Consequently she claims the Celtic saints to be healers<sup>260</sup> and warriors with sin and evil<sup>261</sup>, so depicting the Celtic Tradition as holistic. Her evidence for this, is in the substance of St. Patrick's breastplate which only states the invocation of God to be with the saint in every aspect of life<sup>262</sup>, and a passage from Gerard Manly Hopkins which is a much more contemporary verse, and many extracts from the *Carmina Gadelica*. These representative materials, however can only be interpreted that God is seen through creation and is concerned about it. Whether it amounts to an holistic theology is surely a matter of interpretation that we prefer in our present context.

De Waal comes from an academic background in the study of History and in particular Church history, and so one might feel that she would deal with the material of this period with an historian's perspective. However it appears that she uses the material rather uncritically, seeming to take the material at face value and, while acknowledging that the "lives of the saints" are "traditional legend and hagiography"<sup>263</sup> deals with them as documents of historic events.

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<sup>255</sup> *ibid.* p 82

<sup>256</sup> *ibid.* p 83

<sup>257</sup> *ibid.* p 84

<sup>258</sup> The monks of the 8th century who sought out these lonely places called them by such names as "desert"

<sup>259</sup> De Waal, Esther 1991 *op.cit.* p 72

<sup>260</sup> *ibid.* p 96

<sup>261</sup> "What the Celtic world knew was the totality of healing. Body cannot be healed apart from the soul, and neither can be healed apart from God." De Waal, Esther 1991 *op.cit.* p 114

<sup>262</sup> e.g. Christ with me, Christ before me, Christ behind me, Christ in me, Christ beneath me, Christ above me.

<sup>263</sup> For example it is acknowledged that Adamnam's Life of Columba was written down a century

De Waal feels that the Celtic spiritual tradition is an appropriate tradition to revive because our industrialised society needs to hear and appreciate that God is all around the activities of life, because the modern urban person is as isolated as the Hebridean crofter. Hence the rural and "primal" will provide those in the sophisticated Urban world with a spiritual tradition that will address their needs for fellowship with God, humans and creation, from which people have been divorced. The Tradition provides a means of understanding the work of God in the world as bringing it into a wholeness of relationships. This is an approach that highlights reconciliation and therefore is appropriate for the ecological debate.

God is at work making his world whole. That, finally, is what we gain from a rediscovery of the Celtic tradition ... A world made whole; a world in which the divides go down, and the barriers are crossed, becomes a world which integrates and heals.<sup>264</sup>

It also focuses on the individual's place in this new tradition. So following the tradition of Gildas and Bede, she presents the material to encourage a dedicated life for the Christian which emphasises an individual and personal piety and spirituality.

But questions are raised about the nature of the Tradition. De Waal attempts to present the Celtic Spiritual Tradition as an alternative to the Christianity of the rest of Europe. The contrast she makes is that while traditional Puritan and Protestant spirituality focuses on taming the body, the Celtic tradition focuses on the relationship with God in all aspects of life. Is this a fair contrast? Part of the Puritan tradition is the understanding that God is glorified and praised in all aspects of life and work. It is not only those called to a vocation within the Church that are spiritual. All Christians exhibit their spirituality in their lives. This tradition developed along one line into the Protestant work ethic which has been so maligned today. Yet an important aspect of this Protestant tradition is that each Christian relates to God and serves him in all activities of life.

Yet it is true that the Protestant tradition has focused more on the cognitive aspect of faith and expressed it in rational and literary terms. This is not unique to the churches of the Reformation. De Waal omits in her books the strong tradition of Gospel writing, monastic education and preaching associated with the Celtic church and witnessed to in the Lives of the saints and Bede's works. This, surely, is an emphasis on the more intellectual approach to Christianity. De Waal seems to ignore this aspect of the Celtic Tradition because she uses as her foundation for her discussion, the material from the Outer Hebrides and to some extent romanticises this as the work of poor, rural, oppressed, uneducated people. Yet the material that she works with is now literary material and so is becoming intellectual in substance. Therefore can one really present Celtic Spirituality as an "alternative"?

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<sup>264</sup> after the saint's death, but she seems to feel that this is sufficiently contemporary with the saint to make it a biography  
De Waal, Esther 1991 *op.cit.* p 129

Second, the author recognises that in exploring the Celtic tradition, it is all too easy for each person to discover the tradition that they want to find to meet their particular needs and concerns

But to discover a tradition just because we need it can be a dangerous undertaking. It is vital to be strictly honest here and not to lapse into any sentimentality or romanticism which will merely find in the Celtic world material to feed contemporary needs and longings, and thus to remake the past in our own image.<sup>265</sup>

De Waal sets the reader a very difficult task, for it is clear that she feels that the Celtic material does speak to the contemporary situation and offers a model for spirituality that would be appropriate to many people in the late twentieth century. She tells the reader to allow themselves to be drawn into the material through their experiences and feelings and that the cognitive, rationalistic approach will not be helpful. Therefore the reader can only come to the material from their emotional and personal context which will bring with it all the concerns that need to be met. By coming to the material in this way the reader is being invited to read into it the answers to her needs.

To some extent, however De Waal understands the reality of the readers, for the discovery of a spiritual tradition, is the discovery that this tradition meets the faith needs of the discoverer. It is discovered because it seems to speak to the needs and concerns of the present age and the individual context. Fowler's studies<sup>266</sup> on faith development and stages of faith present such a theory, and go on to describe how faith perspectives change with changing contexts. Although Fowler focuses on the context of age, could it not also be true of other contexts, including socio-economic, political and ideological.

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<sup>265</sup> Allchin A.M. & De Waal 1986 *op.cit.* p x

<sup>266</sup> e.g. Fowler J. *Stages of Faith: The psychology of human development on the quest for meaning*, London, Harper & Row, 1981

### 3.4. Single Issue Texts

Mary Low represents the category of contemporary works which is both an anthology and a "single issue" concern. Her book<sup>267</sup> is a re-write of a doctoral thesis and as such it is a more scholarly work than some of the other contemporary publications on Celtic themes. However the rewriting has no doubt provided a more popular approach to the subject, so that it is more accessible to the general public. Like Bamford and Marsh<sup>268</sup> it is a book with a more specialised subject. The subject is the concept of Nature in the Celtic Christian tradition of Ireland from the 7th to 12th centuries and with reference to the 5th century (St. Patrick). The title proclaims it to be about the relationship between nature and Celtic Christianity or the role of nature in the theology and practice of Christianity in the Irish tradition of the post Roman period. The work is in fact broader than this because it takes into consideration material of pre-Christian era, which the author considers to have been developed within the Christian era.

The material used is selected from the broad range of Celtic material available, and no distinction is made between secular and sacred material. Indeed the author claims that no distinction can be made, as the material itself makes no distinction and the nature of the worldview of the time demands that all poetry is imbued with religious ideas. Both the material from the Christian era and the pre-Christian era is religious in content and contains religious motifs and concepts. The book makes some attempt to distinguish between Christian and pre-Christian ideas, but stresses that it is a difficult task as the Christian era borrowed and used the pre-Christian concepts as well as distinctly Christian ideas. While occasional reference is made to the *Carmina Gadelica* she is unprepared, like some authors, to accept that it is of the same tradition. It may be developed from the 12th century traditions, but, for her, is not of the same order.

Following the introduction the book then examines the poetry in certain areas and the author draws parallels with material elsewhere, mainly from the Christian Scriptures, but occasionally alludes to other Faiths and to the pre-Christian Celtic beliefs. So she analyses the material in terms of what is expressed about land, hills, trees, birds, water and wells, seasons, fire and the Sun.

Low is attempting to understand, define and categorise the theology of nature of the Celtic Christianity of the period under examination. This has to be gleaned through the literature available, as there was no attempt to produce a systematic theology in the period. Therefore the material comes out of the experience, emotion and faith expression of the period and this needs to be analysed within its context. She approaches the material from a critical analytical method but acknowledging that the task is difficult because so little is known of the contemporary social situation and the worldview. Consequently her conclusions are very limited, and the best that she is able to do is to draw out parallels in the material to the Biblical material and Christian ideas. She points to conclusions and asks questions, but largely her work is one of analysis not judgement.

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<sup>267</sup> Mary Low *Celtic Christianity and Nature: Early Irish and Hebridean Traditions*, Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 1996.

<sup>268</sup> Bamford C. & Marsh W.P. *Celtic Christianity: Ecology and holiness*, Edinburgh, Floris, 1986

While the book is obviously a more scholarly and academic work, it has developed from her experience of the Celtic sites in Ireland and in each chapter she refers to an experience that she has had that relates to the theme of the chapter. The Celtic tradition is strongly one of experience and the wisdom that is derived from this rather than the studied academic approach to theology. Low is then unable to break from this tradition, even in an academic work. The material that she is working with is primarily a result of experience, the experience of nature and the work of God in nature, and so she acknowledges this in referring to her own experiences.

The Bible has a central place in her study, believing that it was one of the major influences on Celtic poetry, and she constantly draws parallels from the Old and New Testaments to concepts used in the poetry. There is little literal dependence on the Bible but the concepts often coincide. One example of this is the discussion on the nature and place of the Celtic poetry in the life of the Celtic Church in Ireland. She considers that the material was used at festivals, which themselves, although Christian, were related to Pre-Christian religious celebrations and rites. The material which may have originated in the Pre-Christian times has been developed and modified for use in the Christian context. She acknowledges therefore the dependence of the Pre-Christian ideas, but also relates this to the Old Testament material that is related to festivals, such as the Psalms. The connection is made with both culture and the Scriptures.

So the question arises, "Is this syncretism or contextualisation?" I feel the best word is a coalition of ideas and concepts. The coalition is of Christianity, Biblical material, Pre-Christian ideas, and culture. Hence Celtic Christianity is a coalition of these things.

Although she has no intention of defining Celtic Christianity, she does point to certain features found in the Tradition. Dependent upon the definitions and ideas of Harold Turner<sup>269</sup> the author claims it to be a "primal religion"<sup>270</sup>, which is not dualistic<sup>271</sup> and so does not separate the sacred and the secular; believes in a God that is both imminent and transcendent<sup>272</sup> as well as the reality of the "otherworld" and the powers of the elements.

These are the things of everyday and the concerns of a particularly rural community. Consequently it can be claimed that Celtic Spirituality is a rural expression of religion rather than an Urban one. This is a major factor in understanding the ideas of Celtic Christianity in Ireland (and much of the rest of the British Isles). The society in Ireland was totally rural, and towns and cities were unknown in the period. Hence the theology is expressed in rural ideas and concepts. The concern for nature and its use as illustrations for concepts and ideas, was no romantic longing for a return to nature or the concept of the paradise of nature, it was the things of everyday life. Hence Paradise is understood in terms of the Garden of Eden rather than the Celestial city. This concept of Nature is consequently very strong in the tradition. Religion is related to symbols of nature, and hence wells, trees mountains and other natural features continue to remain important. Yet

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<sup>269</sup> Turner H.W. *The Primal Religions of the World and their Study in Hayes V.* (ed) *Australian Essays in World Religions*, Bedford Park, 1977

<sup>270</sup> Low op.cit. p 19

<sup>271</sup> Her work on such subjects as light and darkness give evidence that the two opposing concepts are held together.

<sup>272</sup> Her use of the "I AM" poetry is a good example of this.

Low considers that it is more than simply the convenience of the everyday things. In the introduction she states that the natural world was for the Irish the place of worship. Worship was undertaken in the open, among trees. It is only later that there is a retreat into buildings for safety. This dislocates the worship from the elements of nature. Irish Celtic Christianity then is inherently a Christianity of the rural context.

The purpose of the book is to analyse the material and not to make judgements or even to a large extent conclusions. However she is aware of the current interest in all things Celtic and warns of the dangers of making too strong a connection with the present day. She acknowledges that there are a number of elements of the Celtic Tradition that may be helpful today, but there are also some that would be totally irrelevant. Therefore there is no place for a revival of Celtic Christianity. This would be inappropriate as she concludes that the contexts of 20th century Britain and 7th century Ireland are very far apart. They were rural, we are urban for example. For her the importance of the Tradition for today is the coalition of ideas that produced the Celtic Christianity of the 7th century, a Christianity that changed and developed over the centuries. Such a coalition, today would include the coming together of the Biblical material, Christian concepts and beliefs together with the contemporary worldviews. This is no revivalism, but a missionary motive and concept. It may be similar to the ideals of the Iona Community, setting the Celtic Christian concepts in today's context. In this sense the conclusion that Low does not draw must be that the value of the Celtic tradition is to enable the present generation to appreciate the contemporary worldview and to bring this together with Biblical ideas and the fundamentals of Christianity into a new contextualised Christianity. The missionary task must include the readiness to value the popular expressions of faith and the spiritual and use these as the means of expressing the Christian faith and the understanding of Christ.

Yet Low does draw the conclusion that nature, itself is important in this process. The work that she has undertaken is not just an arbitrary selection of one aspect of the Celtic tradition. She concludes that Nature is a fundamental and a common ground of all humanity. Its use as symbolism, and concern for it is fundamental to all religions. As such it is a "meeting point" for all people and all faiths. The distinctive feature of Celtic Christianity is that it believes and expresses God as Creator and as having control over creation. This concept she stresses was a major factor in the conversion of the Irish as it gave confidence and security to the people of a rural context. Again she takes the statement no further, but the question has to be raised as to what is the equivalent today? The ecological issue is a concern today, but it is not the same ecological issue as that of the 6th Century. Does she imply that another value of the Celtic Tradition for today is that of the confidence that God is in control of the world?

Therefore Low does accept that the Celtic Tradition has value for today, although she selects which parts of this tradition is useful. Of greatest use is the process of the tradition whereby it is a contextualised spirituality, which developed through the use of familiar symbols, myths and ideas, for the era. This is the value of the tradition, not the details of it. Therefore Low must consider that the value of the tradition today is not to retreat into an historic romanticism and a return to the ideas of the 6th century, but an appropriate use



and development of particularly the nature images and concept of God as creator to address the ecological questions of today.

### 3.5. Reconstructions

The works that approach Celtic Spirituality from an historical point of view fall into two parts. There are those that are attempting to reconstruct the historic Celtic Christianity from a Christian perspective and those that approach it from a pluralist perspective. The general purpose, in both cases appears to be with the objective of exploring and extracting those aspects of the tradition that would be of help and influence to the contemporary era to revive the Church and make it more relevant to the current concerns and issues. This is true of both schools, which we will call that of Sheldrake and that of Toulson, although Toulson would want to inaugurate a more pluralist faith, which draws on many religious traditions and not solely the Christian tradition.

Shirley Toulson came to an interest in Celtic Christianity through her research into British and Irish folklore<sup>273</sup>. Therefore she is one of the people who Esther De Waal is happy to allow to pick up the areas of Celtic Christianity that she considers to be semi-pagan. And this is what Toulson seems to do as she presents her understanding and research of the Celtic Tradition from the pre-Christian era through her recent writings including *The Celtic Alternative*<sup>274</sup> and *The Celtic Year*.<sup>275</sup> The title of the work *The Celtic Alternative* indicates that the author has the intention of bringing to the readers' notice the truth about Celtic Christianity which has been hidden and suppressed by the Church for over one thousand years. Her thesis implies that it has been suppressed because it is a more appropriate form of Christianity for the "common people"<sup>276</sup> as it builds upon the primal religious concepts that sanctify the earth and creation, which is in contrast to the orthodox western doctrines of the church which generally attempt to despise the created order and impose an oppressive conformity.

Toulson does not define Celtic Christianity but in her works she is ready to draw upon a number of sources. The writings of Gildas and Bede are in the background of her work, which she builds on with quotations from the lives of the saints and the poetry collected by Alexandra Carmichael<sup>277</sup>. Thus she spans the period from the fifth to the late nineteenth century for her material which she happily throws together. This is a common approach to the recently published works on Celtic Christianity, but Toulson seems to be more blatant in her approach.

She also manages some historical gymnastics to relate the Celtic Tradition to the ancient myths and archaeological evidence of the pre-Christian era, even to the Neolithic period of Britain. She is particularly interested in the heritage of the "Druidic Culture and Wisdom"<sup>278</sup>. But this is too narrow a base for her thesis. Wanting to provide a new spirituality for an Interfaith age, she attempts to find relationships with Hinduism and

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<sup>273</sup> Bibliographical note in Toulson S. *The Celtic Year*, Shaftsbury, Element 1993

<sup>274</sup> Toulson S. *The Celtic Alternative: A Reminder of the Christianity we lost*, London, Century, 1987

<sup>275</sup> Toulson S. 1993 *op.cit.*

<sup>276</sup> Toulson 1987 *op.cit.* p10

<sup>277</sup> Carmichael A. *Carmina Gadelica: Hymns & Incantations* collected in the Highlands and Islands of Scotland. Current version Published by Floris Books, Edinburgh 1994

<sup>278</sup> Toulson 1987 *op.cit.* p 15 - 25

Buddhism<sup>279</sup>, and also the early Christian sects and heresies of the first centuries<sup>280</sup>. Although it is noteworthy that she does not mention Pelagianism. *The Celtic Year* and *The Celtic Alternative*, then, approach the subject of Celtic Christianity as a development of the original or indigenous religion, to make it acceptable for the new medieval era and the "New Age" of today.

Her description of the nature of Celtic Christianity is dealt with in terms of its background, the people, and the holy places. *The Celtic Alternative* is written in these three parts, while *The Celtic Year* is a Pilgrim's guide through season and month, linking the people and places to different themes suggested by the ancient agricultural calendar. She is not concerned with a Church but with the roots and development of the Celtic Spiritual Tradition.

Describing this Celtic Spiritual Tradition, she assumes that with the withdrawal of the Roman Troops from Britain in the 5th century, went Christianity<sup>281</sup>, so that the people returned to their pre-Christian religion and particularly the influence of Druidism. This is, for her, the background to the debate at the "Synod of Whitby" that in reality the debate was between a Celtic spirituality that was informal, syncretistic and primal and the Roman spirituality that was institutionalised and exclusive<sup>282</sup>.

Her presentation of the Celtic saints and monks starts with the idea that they were "heirs of the Druids and Bards"<sup>283</sup> and even of the "Bronze Age Tradition"<sup>284</sup>. Their names were derived from the names of the old gods and their hagiographies show that they were confused with the ancient gods and mythical figures<sup>285</sup>. Yet the connection is far from proven and has to be conjecture. Even accepting the statements there is only reason to say that the saints were confused with ancient gods and mythical figures. Likewise, it is acceptable that they are the "heirs of the Druids and Bards", but surely this is primarily in a social sense. To say that they are heirs of the Bronze Age Tradition, however is going too far. The connection with other myths and traditions does not deny their existence nor their authenticity as Christian saints. There are many Irish girls called Dana today, but we do not assume that they are the incarnations of the ancient Irish Goddess!

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<sup>279</sup> Toulson 1993 *op.cit.* p 15

<sup>280</sup> More acceptable parallels, possibly, are drawn with the early church and in particular the heresies of Arianism, Gnosticism and Monophysitism (Toulson 1987 *op.cit.* p 38)

<sup>281</sup> Although this is not the consensus of modern historians who would generally accept that Christianity remained in Britain. e.g. Ellis P. Beresford *Celt and Saxon: The struggle for Britain A.D. 310 - 937*, London, Constable, 1993 and Thomas A.C. *And Shall These Mute Stones Speak? : Post-Roman Inscriptions in Western Britain*, Cardiff, University of Wales Press, 1994.

<sup>282</sup> Toulson S. 1987 *op.cit.* p 147, and p 9 When matters came to a head at Whitby and the Celtic Church ceased to exist, we lost a form of individual Christianity which, through its Druidic roots, was truly linked to the perennial philosophy of humanity. Of course the Celtic Church did not cease to exist as a result of the decision at Whitby. This synod decided matters only for Northumbria and although its consequences were eventually felt all over Britain and Ireland it was many centuries before the "Celtic Church" ceased to exist. Aspects of Christianity that are normally associated with the "Celtic Church", such as non-celebrate clergy continued into the middle ages.

<sup>283</sup> Toulson S. 1991 *op.cit* p 9. On p7 the connection is made between the Bards and the tradition of Caedman who was given the gift of singing after the monastic meal. This surely refers to the social and cultural heritage and not necessarily a spiritual one.

<sup>284</sup> Toulson S. 1991 *op.cit* p 9

<sup>285</sup> Brigid is one well known example of this conflation of names of both ancient gods and saints (Toulson S. 1987 *op.cit* p 75) and Toulson also associates the god Mannon with the Archangel Michael Toulson S. 1987 *op.cit* p 23)

The hagiographies were devices to encourage people to lose their "fear of the cruel and hostile nature that could traditionally only be placated by subservience to local gods" and replace it with a benevolent attitude to fellow creatures<sup>286</sup>. In this way the saints represent the continuing traditions of mother earth and nature, and while accepting that they could heal and predict the weather<sup>287</sup>, she understands their miracle stories as representing "peace with nature"<sup>288</sup>. The tradition of the Celtic monasteries often being built by holy places and holy wells is, for her, evidence of this interpretation of the tradition. Such stories as the beheading of Winifred of the Holy Well in North Wales continue the spiritual tradition relating Christianity to the pagan traditions of wells and healing places and the "cult of the severed head"<sup>289</sup>. Certainly it is true that wells have continued to be seen as special places and again in recent years are being "reverenced" by more people. Wells as sources of a necessity of life in a rural and non industrial society need to be preserved. Thus they are given a sacred nature and become places of pilgrimage.

Pilgrimage is part of the tradition that she is reconstructing, although she questions the nature of pilgrimage associated with the missionary nature of the saints. She also She also minimises the understanding that they were on the trail of "White Martyrdom" searching for exile and lonely places for the good of their souls, and suggest that rather they were looking after body and health and prosperity.

... the Welsh monks seem to have had two valid reasons for leaving their homeland. It has been suggested that they found themselves pincered between an influx of Irish invaders and raiders on the Welsh coast, from the Llyn peninsular to St. David's Head, and the Saxon hordes coming in from the east. About the same time they would have been anxious to flee from the virulent outbreaks of yellow plague, a form of hepatitis, that hit the country in the fifth and sixth centuries.<sup>290</sup>

Most historians would agree that these were factors influencing the migration of people from Britain to the continent, but the "peregrinate" motif was also a very real factor.

Toulson ends with the character of pilgrimage as important to the Celtic tradition, although it is not exclusively so. Pilgrimage, for the author, is about finding one's roots which she considers to be a "deep human instinct"<sup>291</sup> common to all religions. Hence they can become the symbol of both a search for spirituality and heritage, and so a symbol for one's identity. Further, pilgrimages become the search for peace and healing as the destination of the journey is a traditional holy place that offers healing, counsel and a connection with the past.<sup>292</sup> It is also a public profession of faith<sup>293</sup>, but not in terms of doctrines and creeds, but by the individual who will declare his faith in the things that are meaningful. Celtic Christianity allowed this faith to be expressed through the belief in the

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<sup>286</sup> Toulson S. 1987 *op.cit* p 58

<sup>287</sup> *ibid.* p 63

<sup>288</sup> The title of chapter 5 of the Toulson S. 1987 *op.cit*

<sup>289</sup> Toulson S. 1987 *op.cit* p 127

<sup>290</sup> *ibid.* p 88

<sup>291</sup> *ibid.* p 136

<sup>292</sup> *ibid.* p 141

<sup>293</sup> *ibid.* p145

power of holy places where there can be a meeting with the divine. She says that these pilgrimages

affirm a life lived close to the realities of nature and in defiance of military bureaucracy, in whatever institution that inhuman, impersonal power is vested. Certainly there is no surer way of linking the centuries together, and of feeling a part of the whole long body of the human race, than making one of the journeys across the landscape that has been familiar to generations of pilgrims. And alongside the general public urge to pilgrimage goes the search of the individual soul, the initiation journey, which is as much an internal as an external matter.<sup>294</sup>

This then sums up the authors quest for the Celtic Church. She wants it to be a rediscovered religion, with its roots in all aspects of human spirituality, that is about individuals who can express their spirituality in a way that is not constrained by institutions and dogmas. This is what she presents as Celtic Christianity. From a reading of *The Celtic Alternative* her mission appears to be quite clear, but on approaching *The Celtic Year* it is very transparent. The Celtic Year brings together the ancient Celtic Calendar and festivals into a Christian perspective by linking them with the feasts of the Church, the Gospels and the Gospel writers, the lives of the saints and the poetry of the highlands. She strains the connections as illustrated in this passage from the introduction to the section on Lammas:

The Gentle four-winged, haloed calf adorned with triangles of red dots, the symbol for Luke in the *Book of Kells*, has something to tell us about the hidden strength and elegance of the evangelist... This flying creature - the cow that jumped over the moon - is going to take us from one mode of being to another.

... there are two aspects of Luke's work that must have a particular appeal to the Celtic Church. There is first, the popular tradition that he was a physician... In this aspect of his work, he is as earthed as the ritual prayers and hymns of the Celtic church, which relate always to the recurring essentials of our material being.<sup>295</sup>

Is there any real connection between the writer of the Gospel of Luke and the poetry of the 19th century Highlands and Islands, and the connection between the earthiness of the poetry and the fact that a physician is concerned about people's health seems somewhat tenuous. The painting that is described as a cow jumping over a moon, is none other than a picture from revelation and has nothing to do with times and seasons of the Celtic year.

The author's syncretistic (or is pluralist?) approach to religion and in particular her concept of Celtic Christianity may endear her to the New Age followers but it gives little credibility to her work for many Christians. It is also clear that she collects those aspects of the history and traditions of the Celtic Church that suit her thesis but ignore large areas that would put Celtic Christianity, either its historical aspect or the contemporary forms

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<sup>294</sup> ibid. p 146

<sup>295</sup> ToulsonS. 1991 p 193 - 194

into the orthodox Christian tradition. Her mission, then is to use Celtic Christianity as the vehicle for the production of a pluralistic type religion that draws from many faith traditions, both contemporary and historical to produce a religion for 20th century Britain.

This new religion that she may want to call the authentic Christian religion that has been suppressed over the centuries is one that emphasises the primal religious roots that people are seeking today, is centred on the reception of blessings and is suitable for an individualistic, materialistic culture of the 20th Century. It does not challenge the ideals of society, but conforms to them. Instead it challenges the authenticity of the institutionalised Church. Her mission, then, must include the rejection of the institutionalised Church as an alien development of the "original" faith and religious practice of these islands, and the presentation of her re-constructed Celtic Christianity as an alternative that has always been there.

Toulson is one example of the books that are being published at the present time. Michael Howard is another, though more extreme example. Michael Howard, author of *Angels and Goddesses: Celtic Christianity and Paganism in Ancient Britain*<sup>296</sup> is in the same league as Shirley Toulson and is approaching the material and literature of Celtic Christianity as material for an eclectic development of a new pluralist religion for the 21st Century. He comes from the position of a student of "mythology, folklore and ancient religions"<sup>297</sup> and it is clear that he is not a Christian and does not understand the Christian Religion. His concern for Celtic Christianity is that for him it contains the remnants of the Pre-Christian Celtic and pagan religions and so is a quarry for those aspects of the ancient religions that will provide some for the building blocks for his New Age Church which he wants to build.

He states that he is presenting a personal view which suggests that it is not an objective study of the material. He is writing an "Apology" for his doctrines and his ideas, which will of necessity be eclectic. At the same time he says he is taking a "esoteric"<sup>298</sup> approach to the study and therefore is writing for those who know about the Celtic traditions, myths and beliefs as well as having a knowledge of Celtic Christianity, presumably in its historic form of the 5th - 12th centuries A.D. However these two statements appear to conflict. To be "esoteric" assumes that the initiated have studied the subject and that his approach in such a situation must also be a studied (academic?) approach. Yet it is not.

The Celtic tradition is for him syncretistic, borrowing concepts, symbols and myths from other religions and cultures. He cannot accept that such symbols and ideas may be inherently Christian<sup>299</sup>. His thesis is very much that the Christianity of Britain, both Celtic and Anglo-Saxon was syncretistic and while it denounced the pagan religions and worship of these islands it also borrowed and incorporated much of it into the Christian traditions, rituals and doctrines. He implies that this is hypocrisy. Yet what he is really describing in his understanding of syncretism is the contextualisation of Christianity as it encounters

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<sup>296</sup> Howard *Angels and Goddesses: Celtic Christianity and Paganism in Ancient Britain*, Chievely, Berks, Capall Bann Publishing, 1994

<sup>297</sup> *ibid.* Introduction, p 3

<sup>298</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>299</sup> *ibid.* p 20 also e.g. the portrayal of Paul as misrepresenting Jesus and changing him into a mystery cult and a dying and rising God, by drawing on the Mithras belief etc.

culture. He states that the pagan religion and Christianity were "dramatically changed by contact with each other."<sup>300</sup> As such, the Celtic tradition focuses on the immanence of God in creation, but for the author this is pantheism<sup>301</sup>. Being influenced by the work of Matthew Fox<sup>302</sup> he emphasises the importance of creation-centred spirituality<sup>303</sup> and the importance of the doctrine of "original blessing"<sup>304</sup> as opposed to the Church's doctrine of Original sin. In this he fails to note that evil was very real for the Celts. The elements are understood by the saints as aspects of chaos and so need to be dealt with by prayer<sup>305</sup>. These things defy the created order and so have to be put back into their place. The created order is to be subject to humanity not in power over it.

Howard has clearly a mission in view, to discredit the Church and to promote the ideas of the New Age religions. He does this by drawing on the Celtic Tradition as an alternative to that which has been the centre of Christian belief and practise over the centuries. Yet his understanding of that Tradition is primarily pre-Christian in content. The Church has taken over many of the aspects of this tradition but has misused them. This New Age movement draws on ancient religions which are, for him, more authentic than Christianity, and more suited to the individual. He is attempting therefore to liberate the tradition from the church and to make it an instrument for a new pluralistic religion.

Howard also subscribes to the school that promotes the idea that the rise in interest in Celtic Christianity is due to the failure of the Church to be able to deal with contemporary needs. He quotes opinion polls that state that while very few people go to church 60 - 70% of them believe in God or the Divine, reincarnation and spiritual powers<sup>306</sup>. The belief in the Divine, of the non-church-goers is expressed in more appropriate terms and they relate to the old religions easier than they do to Christianity because they are disillusioned with Christian orthodoxy. This disillusion is due to the fact that the Church cannot answer such fundamental questions as "Why does God allow evil?". Yet does the new religion answer this question?

Most authors seem to take a similar approach by drawing on material from a wide range of history and putting it together as a supposed unity, although few would go so far as Toulson and Howard in trying to make the connections with other Faiths and pre-Christian primal religions. Each author may have a different purpose or mission in his writing, but clearly the overall task is to present Celtic Christianity (whatever it is conceived to be) as a faith that will deal with the issues of the late 20th century Western society.

Not many authors would be prepared to draw on the heresies of the past and give them some credibility for today, as Toulson does, but many would raise the question that the rejected and oppressed minority groups within the Church may have had a more authentic faith than is found in orthodox western theology. Authenticity of faith in these studies is

<sup>300</sup> *ibid.* Introduction p 4

<sup>301</sup> It is also a misunderstanding of the use of symbolism e.g. Cf the idea that Jesus says he is the light of the world, yet this does not mean that we worship the sun because Jesus is in the sun.

<sup>302</sup> Howard *op.cit.* p 145

<sup>303</sup> *ibid.* p 150

<sup>304</sup> *ibid.* p 145

<sup>305</sup> This is true of the story of Aiden and the storm and the many stories of Columba. In particular the story of the encounter with the Loch Ness monster which is mentioned in Howard *op.cit.* p 120 does not end with the saint blessing the monster, but cursing it.

<sup>306</sup> *ibid.* p 141

generally defined as a faith of the people, rather than the authorities. Folk faith and folk religion gain in credibility while the institutionalised faith of the church is losing ground.



### 3.6. Christian Reconstructions

Within the Christian context, and for those authors who would want to confine themselves to exploring the Celtic Tradition from a strict Christian perspective, there are an increasing number of books being published to help people develop their personal spirituality. The influence of the Celtic Tradition is seemingly great upon the increasingly popular process of exercise of spirituality among a wide variety of Christians. It is for these people that a number of authors have published works that relate either directly to the Celtic saints or to explore different aspects of the Celtic Tradition that they feel will be of assistance to those looking for a deeper spiritual life.<sup>307</sup>

A number of texts have been published over the last few years that attempt to find in Celtic Christianity means to make the church more acceptable to people of late 20th century Britain with the assumption that the church has become outdated and unable to deal effectively with the generally accepted felt needs of people. Society has moved from one which is willing to accept the communal aspect of religion to understanding that religion is a private and individual matter. Therefore the church has to become more of an institution that will enable people to be individual Christians. There has been a greater recognition, recently, that the Church constitutes only a minority of people who call themselves Christian. It is possible that for many authors the Celtic Tradition helps to speak to this situation, which is largely unacceptable for the Church.

The underlying assumption by these authors must be that there is both a need and a search for a different or deeper spirituality among the Christians of 20th century Britain, than that which has been offered by the various churches. These churches must include all the variety of denominations and groups of the Church in Britain from the Roman Catholic to the Pentecostal. The perceived inability of the institutional churches to deal with the issues and concerns of the present day, which is a time of rapid political, economic, social and religious change, is due to its traditional approach to faith through intellect, history and reason. The contemporary context for spirituality, however, is understood to be centred on personal "experience of signs and wonders"<sup>308</sup>, which the church can only stylise in terms of ritual and sacraments. The rise in interest of the Celtic tradition is then, to be put alongside such movements as the Post-Green community, the charismatic movements, Spring Harvest and the Wild Goose Group of the Iona Community. The locus of faith has moved from the Church to "spirituality", which becomes a more acceptable concept and term.

Russ Parker in the preface to Simpson<sup>309</sup> compliments the author on his work because he is attempting to approach the concern that the 1990's in Britain is an era of searching for spiritualities. People have moved out of a precept that spirituality and religion is something to be hidden and turned from this seclusion to any spirituality that can be found to meet their needs. In this search the numerous directions that people have taken are included in the all embracing term "New Age", but have excluded the church. This he

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<sup>307</sup> This survey includes the books: Hume B. *Footprints of the Northern Saints*, London, Darton Longman & Todd, 1996; Ray Simpson *op.cit.*; Mitton M. *op.cit.* and Sheldrake P. 1995, *op.cit.*

<sup>308</sup> Simpson *op cit.* p ix.

<sup>309</sup> *op cit.*

calls the quest for spirituality outside of the established church, because it has been unable to deal with the questions and concerns of the contemporary era. The re-discovery of the Celtic Church is a means of addressing these issues on the precepts of those on the quest.

It should not surprise us therefore to find a growing interest in the life and witness and teaching of the Celtic Church because it weaves together all the strands of this quest<sup>310</sup>.

The quest is described as "to do with the need for renewal, relevance and roots"<sup>311</sup>.

The revival or reinvention of the Celtic Spiritual Tradition is a way in which the authors attempt to contextualise Christianity for those who find Church an unattainable or unacceptable portrayal of Christianity. And as with any attempt at contextualisation both the Church and the people (those undertaking mission and those receiving mission) need to adapt. The adaptation for the church has to be within the range from reform to change, depending on where the author is coming from. Hume, for example, clearly from a Roman Catholic background is confined to his received concept of the Church and his book clearly states that its intention is to help people, through the example of the lives of the saints, "to return to Church"<sup>312</sup>. His selection of the saints (which is not confined to the Celtic Saints, but rather to the historic period of the 7th - 9th Century), is decided by the aspects of spirituality that he wants to encourage. Thus he manipulates the lives of the saints to express means of meeting the perceived spiritual needs.

Mitton and Sheldrake are members of the Community of Aidan and Hilda and seem to have shared some similar experiences of the Church. Both come from an Anglican background but feel the need to reject the tradition of the Reformation because it has resulted in the present structures and ills of the Church. Such theology that comes out of protest is considered to be irrelevant to the present context. The Community of Aidan and Hilda has a high regard for the Celtic saints as exemplars of the Christian faith. Their strong emphasis on the spirituality of the Celtic saints to determine the life and order of the community is understood by the statement in the preface of Mitton by Barrington-Ward:

They [the Celtic saints] demonstrate ... the ultimate reality, beyond all distortion and deceit, of the risen Christ, breaking in upon us to disclose the nature of true humanity, and indeed the real nature of the whole of creation.<sup>313</sup>

This is to imply that the Celtic saints were the most perfect image of Christ that has been seen. It presents the Celtic Church as the best expression of Christianity that has been seen in the whole of history. The author states:

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<sup>310</sup> *ibid.* p ix

<sup>311</sup> Hume *op.cit.* p 87

<sup>312</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>313</sup> Mitton *op.cit.* p xii

Whilst it had its faults, I believe that the early Celtic Church was the nearest thing we get in our Christian history to a complete expression of faith in this country.<sup>314</sup>

He therefore relegates all other expressions of Christianity and the Church as less authentic than the Celtic Church. This sort of statement obviously stems from his own personal experience and struggle with the Church and Church history. This struggle includes the concern for the Church as an institution that over the years has shown division and disunity instead of unity and his struggle with the Church of England being an established Church and his inability to deal with the issues of the Reformation. His difficulty with the Reformation he expresses as:

As a Protestant I have never felt entirely comfortable with finding my spiritual roots in the religious and political protests of the sixteenth century.<sup>315</sup>

Instead he would rather find in the Celtic Churches a model that he claims to go back beyond protest and division and the roots of all Churches in Britain today. While this may be a noble aim, it is surely based on false assumptions. First the Church has a long history of spirituality out of protest and reform, which is part of the Judaeo-Christian heritage. The Prophetic nature of Christianity is one that challenges both society and itself. Christ was, amongst other things, a protester and reformer. Secondly, the Celtic church could hardly be described as a unity and without division. The author admits that there were differences in the Celtic Churches but claims that these were not divisive. Yet the very tradition of the Celtic Heritage is one of division, protest and non-cooperation with the Roman Church. Bede claims that the British Church was heretical and rejected by God because it refused to join the Roman Mission in the conversion of the English<sup>316</sup>.

But mostly Mitton understands the Celtic Church to be an example of mission and an alternative to the Institutional Church with a better foundation. This is the struggle of Whitby all over again, for it is a discussion on which is the better foundation, Rome or Celt, Peter or John. He mourns the outcome of the Synod of Whitby with the loss of the Celtic cause with the words:

The community-based church committed to poverty could not stand against the hierarchical and centrally organised church that had such effective links with secular power.<sup>317</sup>

Mitton seems to be idealising the historic church in Britain, but he also admits that it was not perfect, and that the ideals which he describes he acknowledges were not exercised by all Christians. Rather the church that he looks at is that extracted from the lives of the saints. This is to be summed up in three concepts, Authenticity, simplicity and holiness. These aspects of the Christian life he illustrates through the stories of people such as Aidan and Cuthbert, Patrick, Illtyd and Brendan. All these aspects of the spiritual life indicate a rejection of power in favour of poverty and can be described as a challenge or

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<sup>314</sup>    *ibid* p 2

<sup>315</sup>    *ibid* p 1

<sup>316</sup>    Bede, H.E. *op cit.* p 103, 331.

<sup>317</sup>    *ibid* p 6

protest to the institutional church. The personal ascetic lifestyle is preferable to the life that is set by the agenda of meetings.<sup>318</sup> A lifestyle of prayer and fasting will bring a closeness to God that will provide a "sixth sense" such that the Christian will be in tune with nature and the spiritual. It was through this that the saints could perceive the present and the future and could understand human nature well.

These spiritual gifts were not exercised by all the Christians of the Celtic Church but by those who were dedicated to the ascetic life. Hence the saints are said to have lived this lifestyle on behalf of the rest of the community. In this sense the author is claiming a priestly role for the few on behalf of the many.

The hermit was to some degree living out fully what most Christians could live out only partially. It was essential that some from the community lived out this life for the sake of the community and indeed for the sake of the wider community.<sup>319</sup>

This seems to contradict to some extent the continuing tradition of the Celtic prayer that the author draws upon, from the collection of the *Carmina Gadelica* which is a collection of prayers of the ordinary people for ordinary, everyday events. Do these really represent the prayers of the saints and the church of the 8th century or do they represent a different aspect of the Celtic heritage? This perhaps relates also to another "strand" - that of the poetic tradition of the Celts. The story of Hilda and Caedman illustrates that poetry and song were a common means of expressing faith and celebrations in the 8th century. There is perhaps a link here with the Highland tradition of the *Carmina Gadelica*. Yet the author claims that the Church needs to recover this lifestyle because of its temptation to worldliness and materialism.

However he does not reject the tradition of the common people, as the Celtic Church includes the strands that take seriously community, women, children and creation. The community of the monasteries allowed for women to take leadership and the stress on the devotion to Mary is cited as evidence for the equality of the sexes within the Celtic church. It would probably be better to say that the Celtic church respected family life and did not expect celibacy to be the order for ministry. Children were part of the community and very much part of the monastery, as they were the only places of education in the land. The monastic schools were a high priority and we read that one of Aidan's first projects was to set up a school at Lindisfarne. Whether these schools admitted children from all walks of life as Simpson claims or whether they were restricted to the sons of monks and monarchs is an open question. However they laid a scholastic foundation that served the nations for centuries. The education of the children and the saints most probably centred around the understanding and exposition of the scriptures. The story of Boisil and Cuthbert reading and meditating on the Gospel of John on Cuthbert's deathbed is cited as evidence for the centrality of the Scriptures. The evidence of the illustrated manuscripts of the Bible and the work of Hardinge, also point to the Biblical basis of theology and life of the Celtic Church.

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<sup>318</sup> ibid p 128

<sup>319</sup> ibid p 127

Both Mitton and Simpson seem to accept the concept of a Celtic Church and use this term rather than espousing the idea of a Celtic spirituality. Simpson describes the Celtic Church as

The Celtic churches were orthodox in faith but diverse in practice, evangelised and maintained unity through friendship, respected women's gifts, felt spiritually linked to creation, celebrated God through all the senses, inspired multitudes to holy lives of prayer, were bathed in the supernatural, and kept learning alive through the Dark Ages.<sup>320</sup>

Hence the faith of the Celtic Church was orthodox because it was ultimately derived from the East and in particular the Desert Fathers<sup>321</sup>. It was kept alive through the centuries through the customs of prayer, holy places and gatherings<sup>322</sup> of the Celtic people, despite opposition from the institutionalised church. This understanding of the roots of the Celtic Church is the so-called of the 5th - 8th Centuries in Britain, but allows the author to draw on any other material that comes from the descendants of the Celtic peoples in Britain and Ireland. So he is able to use contemporary material and the well used poetry found in the *Carmina Gadelica*. It is yet another eclectic approach to the subject.

This suits his purpose because his description of Celtic Spirituality is determined by the needs and concerns he wants to address. He is not producing a book to describe Celtic Spirituality in an objective way but to show that it can be used by the Church to address the spiritual issues of contemporary society. Thus he starts with the issues and finds examples and illustrations from the Celtic material of all times that relate to the issues. The word that he commonly uses is that Celtic Christianity "resonates"<sup>323</sup> with the issues he highlights.

The issues that he isolates and describes represent a major change in British society and culture of the 1990's that many would associate as "post-Modern" culture, although the author prefers the term "post-enlightenment". The author lists elements of this change which appears to be due to the ideological changes brought about by "Market Materialism"<sup>324</sup>, producing a culture that stresses individuals to the almost exclusion of society and community. Community values are no longer of major importance or influence on ethics or lifestyle and so the reality is that the church needs to deal with the individual and with individual Christianity<sup>325</sup>. Christianity for the "Post-enlightenment" era needs to recover the individuals relationship with the natural order and the divine. Hence there is stress on the "natural rhythmic" lifestyle<sup>326</sup> (relating to the seasons rather than an artificial calendar), the reality of spiritual forces in the world<sup>327</sup>, the reality of death

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<sup>320</sup> p xi

<sup>321</sup> Colmon, in the record of the debate at Whitby in Bede, claims that the foundation of the Celtic Church goes back to the teaching of John the Apostle. Simpson very briefly explores the gospel attributed to this Apostle to link it with his conceived aspects of Celtic Christianity and elements of the lives of the saints of the early medieval period. The connection with John is traced through Church fathers such as Polycarp, and Irenaeus.

<sup>322</sup> Simpson *op. cit.* p xii

<sup>323</sup> *ibid.* p 15

<sup>324</sup> *ibid.* p 35

<sup>325</sup> *ibid.* p 36

<sup>326</sup> *ibid.* p 156

<sup>327</sup> *ibid.* p 100

and being able to face it<sup>328</sup>, the place of prayer<sup>329</sup>, and concern for gender issues<sup>330</sup>. These are all generally considered to be part of the modern concern for creation issues, so Simpson is aligning himself with these modern concerns. His selection of these issues is "post-modern" in that it seems to be eclectic, or a collection of "single issues" and is not a systematic approach to the needs of society. While much of Simpson's list is about the individual he also calls for the renewal of community in terms of an appropriate community concept, particularly related to hospitality<sup>331</sup>.

Simpson's approach is eclectic and to take Mitton's symbol, a cord of many strands that is woven together. The strands in themselves are very diverse and may have no relationship with each other. Yet bound together they are given the name of Celtic Christianity or spirituality. The name then, is little more than a name, and the Celtic tradition is used to bind the issues together. This is a truly post-Modern approach for it is producing a system that is not a system. In this respect the authors also illustrate one of the tensions of Post-modernism with respect to history, in that they find that the past is of little value (by rejecting the Protestant history of the church) but at the same time root their new approach in their understanding of the historic Celtic Tradition.

The books of Simpson and Mitton are addressed to the Church which is challenged to take up the issues by moving away from its Reformation doctrines and understanding of the faith to a time before the disunity of the church addressing the faults of the Reformation that lost sight of community and creation in its emphasis on the Word and sin, and so provides a model for evangelism. This time is the "Golden Age of the Celtic Church". The purpose of these books is to encourage a new type of spirituality that is based on experience and takes seriously miracles, signs and wonders as symbols for the 21st Century. The message is that the Church and in particular the Anglican church needs to use the resources of the Celtic Tradition so that it can bridge the gap between Church and people in the new paradigm.

Simpson's book is quite specific while Mitton is far less descriptive in his book and is more prepared to speak in generalities, such as holiness, concern for creation and simple lifestyle. This relates to the issues that he addresses through the major part of the book, and so his definition is related to the needs. He draws out of the collection of Celtic material that which relates to the needs and concerns that he perceives are central to the present era. Hence he has to conclude that the Celtic approach is appropriate for today. Sheldrake approaches the subject of the Celtic tradition from a position of healthy scepticism. The introduction to the book, recognises what many writers are now prepared to state that the concept of a "Celtic Church" is a rather romantic concept that has little historical evidence to support it. He does not accept that there was an entity which could be called the "Celtic Church" but is prepared to speak of Celtic Christianity, which in its historical setting he understands to have disappeared by the 12th century when the process of Romanisation was complete. However it is not simply an historical phenomena for he defines it as:<sup>332</sup>

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<sup>328</sup>    *ibid.* p 187

<sup>329</sup>    *ibid.* p 51

<sup>330</sup>    *ibid.* p 80

<sup>331</sup>    *ibid.* p 67

<sup>332</sup>    Sheldrake P. 1995 p 1

The Celtic people expressing Christian faith within Celtic cultural contexts, exists in a continual line up to the present day

His definition focuses on the content of the spirituality of the church and not upon its structures and order. He is unable to find evidence that there was ever a division between the Celtic church and the Roman church in any way that would amount to denominations, as there was no such historic entity or indeed in the period before the 12th century there would not have been a concept of centrally organised churches. His focus on the Celtic tradition is therefore on particular emphases of the tradition that relate to a people "living on the edge of the civilised world" and believing in the supernatural. The search for the historic Celtic Christianity, then is an unobtainable goal, for we have no evidence for it. Instead the Celtic Christianity that is popular today is presented as a spirituality that has affinity with the environment and the pagan past, and allows an eclectic and non-paternal approach<sup>333</sup> which he describes as:

[It] seems to combine a more contextual, grounded, varied yet uncomplicated, messy, even chaotic faith and spirituality than the conventional, institutional forms.

All this is presented with the underlying assumption that the main aspect of the Celtic Tradition is its continuity through centuries of Christianity, and is evidenced in the *Carmina Gadelica* and the festivals of church and community in Britain such as the harvest festival and All Saints day that originated in the pre-Christian Celtic past<sup>334</sup> (or before). The concern for continuity in religion and spirituality Sheldrake believes is partly the legacy of Bede, and so it is important for the author to show that the Celtic Tradition is one that is derived from the antiquities of Christianity and was no novel innovation in the 6th century<sup>335</sup>. With this understanding the Church in Britain is understood to have moved from a Urban based religion to a rural one which today may be compared to the "base Christian communities" rather than organised churches. It was this move that kept it both within the tradition of the early church and also gave it its distinctive qualities.

This is an important point for Sheldrake as his concern is to enable his readers to develop a personal spirituality rather than a communal or institutionalised one. This concept inevitably rejects the idea that Celtic Christianity was monastic, in the modern understanding of the word. Rather it was "kinship communities"<sup>336</sup>

For Sheldrake, the Celtic Tradition, firstly, emphasises the importance of place and sacred sites, "Place had a sacred significance"<sup>337</sup>, so that much of the archaeological evidence for church buildings of the Celtic era relate to older pagan sites<sup>338</sup>, hilltops, springs and

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<sup>333</sup> *ibid.* p3

<sup>334</sup> *ibid.* p 9

<sup>335</sup> Consequently he holds to the theory that the Church in Britain was not extinguished in the 5th century with the withdrawal of Rome and the Saxon invasions, but continued in a modified form, contextualised to the new political and social realities. *ibid.* p 10

<sup>336</sup> *ibid.* p 16

<sup>337</sup> *ibid.* p 30

<sup>338</sup> Such places would be both traditional holy places and convenient for access (*ibid.* p 27).

islands<sup>339</sup>. It is a recognition that there are geographical places where the sacred meets the familiar and this in itself reflects.<sup>340</sup>

the theological battle between transcendence and immanence in the Celtic Christian experience of God

These places were also symbolic theology, representing the "city of God"<sup>341</sup> and were a microcosm of the cosmos and of society.

... the circular design of Celtic religious sites undoubtedly suggested that such places were replicas of the cosmos, microcosm of the macrocosm.<sup>342</sup>

The sacred places represent the "settlement" concept of the Celtic Tradition, that focuses on the reality of life. The symbolism goes beyond the design of the holy places and church sites, many of which would be circular in design with a boundary wall, to be theological statements. They represent an alternative lifestyle. The enclosed area being the perfected life of the cosmos, while the land outside represents violence and chaos<sup>343</sup>. This takes seriously both the spiritual and the physical aspects of life.

The theological stress on the immanence of God within the Celtic Tradition is also the source of the interpretation of the Celtic concern for the natural world. Sheldrake does not accept that the saints were people who were "ecologically" minded, but rather that they recognised that there was a distance between nature and humanity and that the stories of the saints interacting with creation, and the poetry about creation are symbols of the "image of the unfallen state of the Garden of Eden"<sup>344</sup>. The reality of the early medieval period was that the people simply lived with nature and its inconvenience and sought ways to control both the natural and supernatural.

The second major theme that Sheldrake pursues as essential to the understanding of the spirituality of the Celtic Tradition is that of journeying, which is connected with the search for resurrection. Understanding that the idea of journeying is inherent in the Celtic culture, and was seen as exile from the community. In the case of criminals this is banishment<sup>345</sup>, but in the case of clerics this is to search for the new spiritual life. With most contemporary scholars Sheldrake accepts that pilgrimage was primarily for ascetic reasons<sup>346</sup>, but also wants to hold on to the idea that it was missionary. Citing the account

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<sup>339</sup> The Celtic Cross, incised standing stones and burial places are also to be understood as symbols that replaces earlier pre-Christian symbols, such as trees, to be reminders of, or to mark places that were boundaries between the "other world" and this. (ibid. p 47).

<sup>340</sup> ibid. p 31

<sup>341</sup> ibid. p 33, where the author attributes the idea of such church sites as theological statements to Bede

<sup>342</sup> ibid. p 34

<sup>343</sup> ibid. p 35

<sup>344</sup> ibid. p 76

<sup>345</sup> The journey of Columba to Iona is variously understood to be a penance of exile for his involvement in the massacre of Cooldrevne and as an attempt to find a place of spirituality. The voyage of Columba is a good example of the many faced idea of Celtic pilgrimage. Sheldrake deals with the saga of Columba in the final chapter when he attempts to use Iona as an example of his understanding of the Celtic Tradition.

<sup>346</sup> ibid. p 59



by Bede of Fursa <sup>347</sup> in Germany as essentially a missionary journey, the concept of mission within the Celtic tradition is presented as one of inculturation, where the saints settled among a people and adapted to the local situation. While this statement can be easily challenged when citing evidence from the later centuries when the saints were often in conflict with the local political and religious powers, Sheldrake points out that in the 5th and 6th centuries the pattern of informal, wandering, mission suited the fluidity of the socio-political situation of the time, where later, in the face of the institutionalising of the church it was seen as irresponsible.<sup>348</sup> For him the essential heritage of this aspect of the Celtic Tradition is its flexibility which may well suit the present social and religious order.

Given the fluidity of contemporary western culture, a similar flexibility and mobility may need to characterise the spirituality of our own times.<sup>349</sup>

The author's thesis is that the rise in interest of the Celtic Tradition, in the present day, is one that arises from the dissatisfaction of the institutionalised church, together with all attempts to systematise faith and spirituality, yet at the same time there is a search for a "Golden Age" of faith<sup>350</sup>. Celtic spirituality gives the basis for this new approach to spirituality. It is romantically seen to be a "golden age" of Christianity in Britain, in contrast to the later institutionalising of the Church. So, in this respect, Sheldrake agrees with Simpson, Mitton and Hume. As an informal system it allows itself to be manipulated by those who want to take a "single issue" approach to religion by emphasising whichever aspect of the Tradition suits them. Consequently it is a good quarry for those concerned with the ecological issues of our time. The Celtic spirituality of today becomes a modern spirituality, as it has little real foundation in history. Sheldrake concludes his book with:<sup>351</sup>

Those who 'discover' [Celtic spirituality] today are often Urban people who sense that their spirituality is out of touch with nature, the body and the imagination. ... In one sense ... it is not simply a rediscovery but an *invention*.

Sheldrake does not explain his term "Urban people", but does he refer to the middle class, and in particular the white middle class? The presentation of the Celtic Tradition by Simpson and others is one that will speak mainly to the people who make up the traditional Protestant churches of Britain. Further the author presents the Celtic tradition to be both modern and invented, while at the same time it is traditional for:

the Celtic spiritual sensibility never died out in the British Isles despite the efforts of Latin Christians or Protestants. However, except in the remote regions, Celtic spirituality remained largely unknown and out of the mainstream.<sup>352</sup>

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<sup>347</sup> ibid. p 67

<sup>348</sup> ibid. p 68

<sup>349</sup> ibid. p 69

<sup>350</sup> ibid. p 2

<sup>351</sup> ibid. p 93 - 94

<sup>352</sup> ibid. p 93

In this he is in contrast to his fellow authors, as they wish to find in the Celtic tradition a rediscovery of the historic and project that historic spirituality into the present day. Sheldrake is much more realistic in his rejection of the "Golden Age of Christianity" and his suggestion that the Celtic Tradition as it is portrayed today is a modern invention, and in fact, one could conclude that it has always been an invention each time it is rediscovered, to meet the faith and religious crisis of the time

### 3.7. Neo-Celtic Prayer Books

David Adam has produced seven books of prayers and meditations which he claims to be in the Celtic tradition. He is, perhaps, the most prolific publisher of such material, but he is far from unique. The Iona community and its associated Wild Goose Worship Resource Group has also produced a wide array of material for Christian worship, much of it claiming a Celtic influence. Other groups and communities<sup>353</sup> are also creating similar material primarily for their own worship and meditation but increasingly making it available to the general public.

All of David Adam's books contain within their titles a reference to Celtic prayer and tradition, although most of his material is his own creation and unlike a number of other authors, such as De Waal and Davies and Bowie his task is not to produce anthologies of historic material. Rather he is creating poetry and prayers for the contemporary context of Britain drawing upon and developing the Celtic Tradition. This is therefore truly neo-Celtic.

Adam would claim to be Celtic from his northern roots in Yorkshire and Northumberland but nowhere in his books does he describe what Celtic is. It is therefore necessary to glean from the material the characteristics that it portrays. The most important and central of these characteristics is that Celtic prayer and worship is centred on the awareness of the presence of God<sup>354</sup> and in particular the living Christ in all aspects of life and work. The introduction to each book in some way states or implies this and his collection of prayers is clearly undergirded with this concept. God is felt to be present in the ordinary aspects of life<sup>355</sup> and in the imagination<sup>356</sup> and he even understand the main purpose of intercessory prayer to be to make the intercessor more aware of God's presence<sup>357</sup>. This presence, then, needs to be expressed in the prayers whether these relate to the rural life and the created order, the home and domestic chores, the city and modern technology or work in the industrial setting. All these matters are addressed in the prayers, although it is clear that Adam has a clear preference for the rural setting<sup>358</sup>. "Power Lines" which is a book of prayers for the work context contains mainly illustrations of industry and commerce, and while a few poems are related to this<sup>359</sup>, most of the material is still more appropriate to the rural context. Hence although Adam is influenced by his experience working in the Northumberland Coal seams<sup>360</sup>, the influence of the North York Moors<sup>361</sup> and Lindisfarne seems to be greater.

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<sup>353</sup> For example the Northumbria community which has produced two books of meditations - *Celtic Daily Prayer*, London, Harpercollins, 1994 and *Celtic Night Prayer*, London, Harpercollins, 1996; The Community for Reconciliation - Johansen-Berg J. *A Celtic Collection*, Worcester, Dove Press, 1996

<sup>354</sup> Adam 1987, p xii, 97; 1994 p 6, 21.

<sup>355</sup> Adam 1989, p 38

<sup>356</sup> Adam 1990, p 76

<sup>357</sup> Adam 1994, p 60

<sup>358</sup> Adam 1985, p 60

<sup>359</sup> Adam 1992 contains four poems specifically related to the urban life, p 31, 33, 35, 53.

<sup>360</sup> Adam 1990, p 3

<sup>361</sup> Adam 1987, preface

God is understood as clearly expressed as Trinity in the poetry and as creator of the world<sup>362</sup> and incarnate in it. This immanence of God is important for it means that God can be experienced through the created order and all aspects of life. God is in the midst for he is:

... a God who enfolds, a God incarnate, a God who encompasses the family, a God of the fireside and stable, God in working and in sleeping.<sup>363</sup>

This enables the person of faith to develop a relationship with God that is personal and intimate. Experience<sup>364</sup> is the most important influence in developing one's understanding of God and faith, and this is well illustrated in the "Eye of the Eagle" where each section starts with Adam relating a personal experience. Consequently Adam prefers a "recital theology" which is something that is expressed in common language and daily living to a creedal or doctrinal formulation<sup>365</sup>. This personal relationship, which brings commitment<sup>366</sup> is characteristic of the Celtic Church providing the benefits of blessing<sup>367</sup> and protection<sup>368</sup>. Adam is obviously influenced greatly in this by the material from the Highlands and Islands of Scotland collected in the *Carmina Gadelica*, but also by what he understands of the historic Celtic Church context.

This rural lifestyle reminds the contemporary reader of the importance of creation, for this influences the whole of life<sup>369</sup>, presumably whether one is a rural or urban creature. The urbanite attempts to escape from this reality but it is not possible to do so. Creation is something not to be overcome but to be enjoyed and its beauty appreciated<sup>370</sup>, for it points to God<sup>371</sup>. But it is more than a symbol or a sign, it is the means of unity for the world. Creation is at the centre of the God-human relationship because it is a three-way relationship<sup>372</sup> and a recognition of this would change the world order and address the ecological issues of our time.

While most of these characteristics are derived from the poetry of the *Carmina Gadelica*, Adam does refer back to the historic Celtic Tradition, mainly in terms of the lives of the saints. He understands the saints to be examples of Christian lifestyle exhibiting poverty, humility<sup>373</sup> and a searching for God in the desert places<sup>374</sup>. They are also people of mission<sup>375</sup> who were ready to accept sacrifice and martyrdom. This he interprets for the contemporary context as people being prepared to welcome change and to take the risk to stand out for the issues of the "post-Christian" era which are causing decline and chaos<sup>376</sup>. The third aspect of the Celtic Tradition is that the neo-Celtic material in the books is the

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<sup>362</sup> Adam 1990, p 93 - 95

<sup>363</sup> Adam 1990, p 10

<sup>364</sup> Adam 1987 p 10 - 16

<sup>365</sup> Adam 1992 p ix, xi

<sup>366</sup> Adam 1985, p 21

<sup>367</sup> *ibid.*, p 49

<sup>368</sup> Adam 1990 p 105

<sup>369</sup> Adam 1989 p ix

<sup>370</sup> Adam 1987 p 83, 88

<sup>371</sup> Adam 1990 p 3

<sup>372</sup> Adam 1989, p 3

<sup>373</sup> Adam 1990 p 135

<sup>374</sup> *ibid.*, p 31

<sup>375</sup> Adam 1987, p 111

<sup>376</sup> *ibid.*

work of people who could claim Celtic heritage and under the influence of Celtic holy places such as Lindisfarne. This would also be true of Johansen-Berg's book<sup>377</sup>, which contains little that is distinctly Celtic, except the blessings at the end of each section.

Consequently the purpose of his writings and the place that the Celtic Tradition has for Adam is that it will help people to develop a new spirituality that will give them a greater awareness of God. This is largely a personal and individual spirituality which is fed by the poetry and meditations of his earlier books. However the later books start to address the need for a communal spirituality and one that is much more related to the world at large. The Iona community, however, attempts to focus much more outwardly and uses the inward reflection to help this end. The worship material and prayers that it has published are strongly influenced by the Celtic tradition particularly the Scottish tradition, though there are other strong influences as well, which include the Benedictine tradition and the traditions of the Reformers. The characteristics of the Iona material are:

justice and peace, healing, creation, commitment, community and celebration  
... and ... interdependency and dependency on nature.<sup>378</sup>

and this is related to the material of the Carmina Gadelica which is described as

Christ is seen as being with and for the poor; healing is regarded as a grace that releases the essential life and health of the body and soul, and not in opposition to the natural process of death; and the goodness of Creation is celebrated while life is also regarded as a pilgrimage. Commitment to the gospel is set within the context of an intimate relationship with a personal God; the life of heaven and the life of earth are seen as bound inextricably together; and the delights and demands of welcome and hospitality - expecting to meet Christ in the stranger's guise - are richly portrayed.<sup>379</sup>

The other aspect of the Tradition is the lives of the Celtic saints, who they claim to have had a long history of influence as spiritual ancestors of the modern Scots<sup>380</sup>. This Celtic Tradition had a strong and deep sense of the incarnation and the glory of God in creation and enables the worshiper to use all the senses of the body<sup>381</sup>. Consequently the Iona community has the task of providing a new spirituality and a new ways of worship, drawing on the Celtic Tradition as an important resource.

These neo-Celtic writings, mainly prayers and liturgical material, are the most developed extension of the Celtic tradition. They are resources of contemporary poetry, song and prayer, that is written in the Celtic style and rhythm. It reflects the concerns of the Celtic past that are understood to be essential for the development of an appropriate spirituality

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<sup>377</sup> *op. cit.*

<sup>378</sup> Galloway K (ed) *The Pattern of our Days*, Glasgow, Wild Goose Publications, 1996, introduction to "The worship of the Iona Community" page unnumbered

<sup>379</sup> Newell J. P. *Each Night and Each Day: A weekly cycle of prayers from Iona in the Celtic tradition*, Glasgow, Wild Goose Publications, 1996, p 6.

<sup>380</sup> Bell J.L. & Maule G. *Heaven Shall Not Wait*, Glasgow, Wild Goose Publications, 1987, Introduction p 7.

<sup>381</sup> Galloway K, *op. cit.*

for the contemporary era, emphasising the immanence of God in all aspects of life, and liberating the human-divine relationship from the confines of the Church.

### 3.8. Some Conclusions

Having looked at a representative number of recent publications and authors writing about Celtic Spirituality or Celtic Christianity, we are left with the task of trying to define what the contemporary concept of Celtic Spirituality is. We have already been warned by a number of authors that it is a very difficult task, and yet all the authors and published works have defined Celtic Spirituality in their own way.

Many authors interested in historical studies have attempted to reconstruct the Celtic Church of the early medieval period from archaeological and documentary evidence, and through the projection of continental evidence into the British context<sup>382</sup>. However valid this approach, the authors that have been discussed have not been interested in such a study. The task that these contemporary writers have undertaken is to explore the Celtic Christian tradition with the purpose of providing a Christianity for the contemporary context. The task, then is not to reconstruct but to construct a new spirituality for the end of the 20th Century, primarily for Britain. Therefore the Celtic spirituality that we are analysing is a neo-Celtic spirituality.

What is the content of this spirituality?

Most of the authors agree that contextualisation is central to Celtic spirituality. The historic basis comes out of a contextualising of Christianity into Britain in the early medieval period, where the social structure of the continent had radically changed. Society had become largely rural<sup>383</sup> and therefore without the basic structure to develop a church institution on the lines found elsewhere. This rural expression of Christianity became the norm for much of Britain but scholars accept that there was no one form of the Church. Hence the contextualisation was not just for Britain but much more locally expressed. This period has been part of the Romantic tradition of Britain and this has influenced the understanding of the Church of this period. The Romantic tradition developed strongly in the nineteenth century and so also represents a movement from a Medieval to a Victorian context. This is also a consequence of the nineteenth century urbanisation of Britain which fertilised the imaginative reconstruction of rural society. Set within a rural, heroic, romantic context it has become known as a golden age of Christianity.

This golden age of Christianity that Gildas was looking forward to is contrasted with the political situation of the period that was volatile and unstable. The Christianity of this period, then, is perhaps a response to this period of political crisis giving stability and meaning to people's lives and a hope for the future.

Being contextualised the spirituality is developed through the experience of the people rather than through the development of a systematic theology. So a second centrality of

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<sup>382</sup> for example Warren F.E. *The Liturgy and Ritual of the Celtic Church*, Woodbridge, Boydell, 1987; Addison J.T. *The Mediaeval Missionary*, Philadelphia, Porcupine Press, 1976; Barley M.W. and Hansen R.P.C. *Christianity in Britain 300 - 700*, Leicester, Leicester University, 1968; Hardinge L. *The Celtic Church in Britain*, London, SPCK, 1975

<sup>383</sup> In the case of Ireland continued to be rural as there is no evidence that Rome influenced Ireland to become in the least urban.

the expression of Celtic Spirituality is that it is primarily experiential. It is not based upon a theology that is taught but it is based on a faith that is understood through the experiences of life, whether these are mundane and routine or spectacular. Most authors imply that this experience is primarily a rural one where nature figures large in the equation, but for people like David Adam and the Iona tradition, this experience is primary in the understanding of Celtic Theology and spirituality, and the experience needed is the experience of the Divine at work in every place and situation. Hence the Iona community has expressed its spirituality through the urban and the work situation, which is also a part of the tradition that David Adam exhibits in much of his poetry<sup>384</sup>. Experience then is the working out of one's faith in the life situation and expressing the faith thus developed in the same situation.

For other authors such as De Waal, the experience has to be not only preferably "rural" but also Celtic in nature and ethnicity. She seems to understand that the Celtic nature is essentially rural and marginalised. Hence the true experience that will lead to an understanding and exercise of Celtic Spirituality is one that is attuned to the special situation of the Celt. This marginalisation is as much due to urbanisation as any attempt at ethnic or cultural imperialism. The Hebridean tradition comes from such a context and yet its essence is understood to be the experience of and involvement of God in all aspects of life. The *Carmina Gadelica* is characterised by the intoning of blessings upon all the daily chores, in such an intimate way that not only God, but also the saints are considered to be present in a manner that is normally attributed to the place of ancestors in the African traditional worldview<sup>385</sup>.

This stress on the experience of life, on emotion, feelings and imagination has the effect of nullifying the need for a cognitive approach to faith, and so the concept of a Celtic Spirituality becomes characterised by the rejection of the rational logical expression of faith and, by implication, is anti-modernist. Faith is no longer to be expressed through doctrines, and creeds, and the confession of the Celtic Christian is one that is personal and individualistic. There are, therefore no limits or boundaries to how faith is experienced and consequently this will lead to the removal of boundaries to how the faith is expressed. The individual experience is the pivot of orthodoxy in contrast to the historic understanding of the Church that it is the community's experience that determines orthodoxy.

Placing the rural experience at the centre of Celtic Spirituality gives creation a special place in its theology. Through the evidence of the Celtic poetry, both from the Islands of Scotland and from the Welsh tradition the created order is upheld as a major mediator for praise and worship<sup>386</sup>. Celtic Spirituality relies strongly on the symbolism of nature, understanding that God can be experienced in the natural world. Following in the Psalmist tradition, the Celtic expression sees the created order as essentially good rather than as fallen, as expressed in the more prophetic tradition of Christianity and in particular

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<sup>384</sup> This is not the first attempt at this, by any means, as the nineteenth century saw attempts at developing spiritualities for the Urban context. William Booth being an important example.

<sup>385</sup> Mbiti J. *African Religions and Philosophy*, London, Heineman, 1969, p 83 calls the ancestors the "living dead" who "know and have an interest in what is going on in the family."

<sup>386</sup> Allchin A.M. *Praise above all : Discovering the Welsh Tradition* Cardiff, University of Wales Press, 1991



the Protestant tradition. The survey of the authors has shown that there is a particular antipathy for Augustine of Hippo and his theology that leads to a doctrine of Original Sin. In some respects he is presented as the arch opponent not only of Pelagius but also of the Celtic Tradition. To reject, so strongly the importance of the Church's historic understanding of the need for redemption from sin and replace it with a doctrine of Divine Blessing is to tend towards an antinomianism and with it the cross becomes marginalised in the Gospel. The understanding of the atonement is one of the great metanarratives of the Christian faith and so as such is rejected. Christianity becomes a religion of blessing only where the emphasis is on grace, without the need for human response.

Celtic Theology is theocentric presenting God as the creator who can confer or withhold blessings. God is also Trinity and the poetry from Patrick to the Hebrides expresses this Trinitarian understanding. It is also Christocentric and Christ becomes the saviour in terms of salvation from the everyday ills and misfortunes as well as a hope for the future. However the tradition that is presented by a number of the authors does not stress the centrality of Christ, and his work of redemption can be characterised by Bradley's description of providing a means for creation to be "perfected"<sup>387</sup>. The recognition of God as Trinity recognises also the place of the Spirit in Celtic theology, and the reality of the spiritual world. Authors stress the need to understand the early medieval psychology that recognised the closeness of the spiritual world and the forces of good and evil using the elements of creation as their agents. The fight of faith is therefore no intellectual battle but one lived out in the daily struggle of life.

The place of the Bible is generally acknowledged in historic Celtic Christianity. While some authors understand that the scriptures were central for the early medieval Celtic Christians, most seem only to want to acknowledge their value in terms of the illuminated art associated with them. However there is little stress on the Scriptures for the contemporary exercise of Celtic spirituality. Instead it seems that the personal experience of the Divine has eclipsed the value of the historical community experience of the faith of the Church as expressed in the Bible. This again, illustrated the emphasis on the God experienced in emotion and senses rather than with the intellect.

The Spirituality and theology that is presented is clearly an alternative to that of mainstream historic Christianity. Its alternative nature is attested to in the interpretation of the events of Christian history of England in the early medieval period, by following the tradition initiated by Bede. Celtic Christianity is juxtaposed to Roman Christianity. They are presented as a stark choice, which seems to take a dualistic approach. This is in contrast to a seemingly basic principle in Celtic Spirituality that rejects the dualistic approach to encourage an holistic approach. The presentation of Celtic spirituality as an alternative is founded in this interpretation of the historic data, but with an ill-conceived idea that there was otherwise a uniformity in Christendom before the medieval period<sup>388</sup>. A recognition of the probable diversity of the Church in practice and experience would allow for a greater coming together of the Roman and the Celtic traditions and find much more common ground. The rejection of a dualism in terms of good and evil, sacred and secular, is not followed through when discussing the relative merits of the historic Roman

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<sup>387</sup> Bradley *op. cit.* p 52

<sup>388</sup> note the earlier discussion on this matter p 5 - 6

and Celtic Churches or indeed the contemporary spiritualities of the mainline churches and the neo-Celtic tradition.

Presented as the alternative for an earlier age, it is also presented as an alternative for the present age. Being perceived as derived from a primal religion, it allows a freedom of theological interpretation and claims, because of the emphasis is on a prior, deeper tradition of wisdom that cannot be challenged. Further, rooting the tradition in the early Church in Britain it seems that it is endowed with an authority that will take precedence over any other later development of the church. In this sense the spiritual tradition rejects the history of the church as irrelevant for the present, by drawing on one particular period of history and taking it as a norm for the present age.

Finally, it is also an alternative spirituality in its presentation as a liberation theology. By expressing the Celtic tradition as the property of the poor, marginalised, oppressed, homeless Celts of Britain it becomes a spirituality from the "underside of history". It is a spirituality that will challenge the status quo, and the authorities and powers, so again it is presented in a dualistic manner. Indeed to present it as a stark alternative to the major expressions of Christian spirituality is to make it dualistic.

Consequently it is more than an alternative spirituality or theology. It is indeed a new method of doing theology. It is not a return to a previous era nor an attempt to reconstruct an historical theology. Rather it is an attempt to construct a new theology and spirituality. While Mackey does not describe this new process but leaves the questions for others to answer, a gleaning from the authors shows that it is a process that relies upon "lateral" thinking rather than the traditional rational/logical and systematic approach. The process is an eclectic one and non-systematic, drawing on material and placing it side by side.

This new spirituality is worked out through the experiences and concerns of the authors. As has been stated a number of times, the authors draw on the Celtic tradition as a supermarket resource, collecting those elements that meet their contemporary needs. The basis of this new spirituality is simply a collection of ideas that are held together. Because such an approach can hold many things in tension together, it could be claimed to be holistic.

The most common need is the need to find a new expression of the church, because, for a large number of the authors the institutional church has become irrelevant. There is a general disillusionment with organised religion and so their search is for an expression of the Christian religion that will allow them to reject the church while at the same time allowing them to remain within the church tradition. For some of the authors this has been expressed as a disillusionment with the Protestant (and particularly the Reformed) expression of the Church.

With the rejection of the Church it must follow that there is also a rejection of the community of God's people as an entity. Indeed there are a number of attempts to produce new styles of communities influenced by interpretations of the Celtic Tradition. These communities which seem to meet the needs of a section of society are largely dispersed communities which allow people to be both part of a community but also provide for the

individuality of the members' faith to be expressed. Hence in the place of the Church is put a collection of individuals who have experienced faith. The communal expression of faith is rejected in favour of emphasising the individual's faith. The community of the church becomes little more than a collection of individuals. Individualism and the importance of individual experience of faith becomes another goal for the authors. Experience is the building block of theology, but from an eclectic approach it may simply add experience to experience without the need for rationalising. Such theology is done through emotion not the intellect and each experience of faith is validated.

This eclectic approach to spirituality can be understood to be a spirituality for times of crisis, for if the authors are correct, and that the Church is no longer relevant to society or indeed even to many Christians, then the Church is in crisis. Crises in the past have been met with attempts at reformation, but it is clear that the authors feel that such a time is past and that the present crisis demands a radical shift. This shift is to move from the church as community, organised and institutionalised, to a collection of individuals. The Celtic spiritual tradition is reconstructed to be an expression of this new concept of Church. For most of the authors it is an alternative expression of the church, but for Toulson and Howard it is an alternative to the Church.

## **4. Celtic Spirituality as a Post-Modern Tradition**

## 4.1. The Making of the Tradition

Tradition is an important part of religion. While the Christian faith, particularly in its Protestant perspective focuses strongly on the authority of Scripture, the influence of tradition is not ignored. Other religions may put greater emphasis on tradition over above Scripture, recognising that Scripture can simply be understood as the writing down of the traditions. Tradition is very formative for the Hebrew Scriptures and the Jewish faith, which can be understood to be centred on the founding actions and experiences such as the Passover, Sinai and Abrahamic traditions. The Christian faith early on developed its traditions. Paul refers to the traditions in his letters, and understands them as received truths and rituals<sup>389</sup>. Yet he is not content simply to pass on the traditions "verbatim" but feels it necessary to comment upon them and interpret them. Paul then illustrates that the transmission of a tradition also necessitates the interpretation of that tradition for new contexts. Therefore he interprets the predominantly Hebrew Christian tradition about Christ's passion, death and resurrection for the Greek/Roman context<sup>390</sup>.

Frances Young<sup>391</sup> understands that the development of the Christian Tradition derived from a need to articulate a faith which had been one primarily based on experience. While her book focuses on the development of the creeds of the early church in the third and fourth centuries her thesis is also applicable to the early development of the traditions that we find in the first century and to the development of Tradition at all times. She acknowledges that the creeds embody and articulate a tradition of faith that in the past has been understood to simply be the retelling of "facts"<sup>392</sup>, but that this is a partial understanding. They also represent the formulation and interpretation of experience for different contexts. The Tradition then, is something that is dynamic.

The Oxford English Dictionary<sup>393</sup> defines tradition as:

A long established and generally accepted custom or method of procedure, having almost the force of a law; the body of the experiences and usages of any branch or school of art or literature, handed down by the predecessors or generally followed.

Ecclesiastically it defines tradition as:

Roman Catholic body of teachings derived from Christ and the apostles together with that subsequently committed by the Holy Spirit and to be of equal authority with the Scriptures.

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<sup>389</sup> 1 Corinthians 11: 23 - 26; 15: 3 - 7 are good examples of this transmission of a tradition. 1 Cor 15: 3 Paul writes "For I handed on to you as of first importance what I in turn had received..."

<sup>390</sup> Paul interprets the tradition in 1 Corinthians 11 in verses 26 - 32, explaining that the ritual of the Lord's supper is more than a simple ritual memorial meal and involves an act of commitment and possibly judgement, so allowing the tradition to continue to develop in terms of its understanding throughout the centuries.

<sup>391</sup> Young F. *The Making of the Creeds*, London, SCM, 1991.

<sup>392</sup> *ibid.* p ix.

<sup>393</sup> The Oxford English Dictionary (Second Edition), Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1989.

While the first part of the definition implies that it is a fixed body of action and understanding the second part recognises that within the Church the tradition changes and is modified or at least added to by new revelation and interpretation. More recent scholarship from a sociological perspective has challenged not only the concept of tradition being fixed but also that it is always derived from antiquity. Parratt<sup>394</sup> expresses the need for Tradition to be dynamic and understands that it is reformulated regularly to meet the changing needs of a context. Consequently the concept of Tradition as something that is fixed from the past and unchanging is no longer considered to be an acceptable definition.

Tradition is normally considered to be a body of experience, wisdom, ritual and truth, that is related to a particular context and culture. It is an expression of the belief system or worldview of a particular group of people, which could be a social group or a religious group. So Parratt<sup>395</sup> will say that the purpose of Tradition is to contextualise belief so that it makes the worldview of the social group appropriate for a new or changing context. Tradition is, then, about identity<sup>396</sup>, giving a particular group a means through ritual and "truth" to express their identity and difference from other groups, as well as using the tradition to express their relationship with other groups. The purpose of Tradition is to help give meaning, understanding and structure to a society, defining the boundaries of lifestyle, behaviour and worldview<sup>397</sup>. It will provide the rites, rituals and symbols which give expression to the belief and value systems of the society, and so legitimises the beliefs and worldviews that are developed or developing within a cultural group<sup>398</sup>. Tradition becomes a point of reference, which is particularly necessary at times of change and crisis. This is important for societies and individuals. Hence tradition is considered to be a stabilising process within a society undergoing change.

Tradition develops to meet the changing needs of a society by selectivity<sup>399</sup>, reaffirming those aspects of the tradition that are seen to deal positively with the new society and rejecting those that appear to be irrelevant because they deal with issues and questions that are no longer asked. In this way many myths and stories are either re-interpreted or are superseded by new myths and stories. The metanarratives and local narratives of a society must adapt or perish.<sup>400</sup> When a tradition is unable to deal with the issues that arise from a changing society and culture, and when it is no longer a stabilising process, then the tradition itself is seen to be irrelevant and so a new tradition needs to be developed. The rejection of a tradition relates to this phenomenon that it is unable to cope with changes in society and so it is viewed as no longer credible or authentic. A new tradition is

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<sup>394</sup> Parratt J. *Reinventing Christianity: African Theology Today*, Michigan, Eerdmans, 1995.

<sup>395</sup> *ibid.* Parratt is exploring the need to contextualise theology into African contexts and so understands that the traditions of the church that have been imported to Africa and come out of a European context and the traditions of Africa need to be reinterpreted to bring about a new tradition or contextual theology that will provide an appropriate articulation of Christianity in the African Context. Consequently he considers that the Christian tradition is "reinvented" for each new context.

<sup>396</sup> Schrieter R.J. *Constructing Local Theologies*, London, SCM, 1985, p 12, 105.

<sup>397</sup> *ibid.*, p 106.

<sup>398</sup> Hobsbawm E, *Inventing Traditions* in Hobsbawm E. and Ranger, T. *The Invention of Tradition*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1983.

<sup>399</sup> Boyer P. *Tradition as Truth and communication*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1990.

<sup>400</sup> This is particularly seen in the manner in which the myths and stories of creation, and myths of foundation of societies in Central Africa have been lost and superseded by the traditions of the Old Testament.

developed to take its place. Consequently Einstadt<sup>401</sup> says that the tradition of a society is manipulated by change in social order, yet it is also true that Tradition is used to manipulate the society, particularly by the powerful as a means of control of the people.

It is clear, then, that the relationship between Society and Tradition is an intimate one, such that it is an integral part of the culture, and as culture changes so do the traditions of the culture. The influence is seen to be mutual in that culture is influenced by the manipulation of tradition and tradition is changed by the movements of culture and society.

Tradition is considered to be derived from antiquity and this concept of its age is one of the aspects that gives it an authenticity. It is generally understood to embody the past, which is projected as relevant to the present and the future. Hence Tradition is understood to be enduring. However its very nature of selectivity will show, under investigation, that its antiquity needs to be questioned. Tradition certainly plunders the past for relevant symbols and models, but according to Hobsbawm<sup>402</sup> Tradition is a relatively contemporary construction for each society and therefore is something that is continually reinvented. The plundering of the past to give authenticity also gives a false concept of its antiquity.

The very nature and purpose of Tradition will be eclectic in that it will select those things that are useful and which continue to give meaning and reject those that are considered of no value. The selection of material is often presented as a revival of old traditions, myths and rituals, whereas it is really the production of something new. The nineteenth century saw a "revival" of rural traditions, such as carol singing and the Harvest festivals for the needs of the new urban industrialised society. These traditions, welcomed by the industrial workers, were less of a revival and more an invention to give cohesion to the new societies, and needed the concept of antiquity to give them popularity<sup>403</sup>. Hobsbawm continues<sup>404</sup>:

We should expect [the invention of tradition] to occur more frequently when a rapid transformation of society weakens or destroys the social pattern for which the "old" tradition had been designed ... when such old traditions and their institutional carriers and promulgators no longer prove sufficiently adaptable and flexible, or are otherwise eliminated.

The periodic rise in interest in the Celtic Tradition is an example of this re-invention of tradition in the face of a rapid change in society. The Celtic tradition has been called upon and plundered and manipulated to help give a foundation and stability to a society that is involved in a paradigm shift and questions the relevance of its institutions to deal with the needs of the contemporary society.

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<sup>401</sup> Einstadt, S. N. , *Tradition, Change and Modernity*, New York, John Wiley & sons, 1973, p 155.

<sup>402</sup> Hobsbawm *Inventing Traditions* in Hobsbawm and Ranger *op cit*.

<sup>403</sup> The New Testament is also an example of the development of a new tradition, which makes use of the Old traditions for the sake of a new era. The teaching of Jesus tended to focus on the prophetic tradition of the Old Testament and so could be seen as very selective in its approach. The gospels themselves struggle with the difficulties of the new tradition replacing the old traditions by presenting Jesus and the New Covenant as a fulfilment of the Old. The continuing development of the Church refused to reject the old traditions, yet continually developed the new at the expense of the old.

<sup>404</sup> Hobsbawm *op.cit.* p 4.





## **4.2. The Development of the Tradition in Gildas and Bede**

In the early chapters we investigated the place of the development of a Celtic tradition in the works of Gildas and Bede, and recognised that they were writing in periods of social, political and economic change in England.

Gildas was living through the era of disruption and crisis of the "Saxon invasion" of Britain in the mid 6th Century. He describes the country as unstable economically and politically, but the situation is probably more drastic than that. The changes that he lives through are part of the change from the Roman era into the early medieval period that will bring with it new worldviews, concepts and ideologies. The old order of Roman control and ideals had gone and the new era was emerging. Consequently it could be described as a period of paradigm shift. What is clear to Gildas, and the purpose of the D.E.B. is that the Church is unable to deal with this period of crisis and needs to find new ways and methods.

The D.E.B. is a contribution to the development of a new tradition for Christianity in an attempt to be relevant to the new era. Gildas developed his tradition by first looking at the issues and concerns that need to be addressed and then finding models to deal with them. Central to this new tradition is the concept that Christian ethic and praxis is more important than doctrine. Indeed his new tradition does not involve any discussion about doctrine. Rather it is based on historic precedent. The first source is the Bible, and particularly the prophetic tradition of the Old Testament. Manipulating the tradition he attempts to show that the British are a "New Israel" and so called upon to be the faithful people of God. The second source of the re-invented tradition is the Roman period, which is presented as a Golden Era of Christianity in Britain. This represents a model of faith, order and stability. The tradition emphasises that the church leaders and political leaders should be the upholders and defenders of the faith.

Gildas builds a tradition from the past that he feels will address the needs of his day. He includes within this the developing monasticism but principally wants to use the tradition to rebuild the church with a structure that centres around a reformed clergy and responsible and pious political leadership. This will give a firm foundation for the people so that the church can be an effective spiritual instrument for the people, becoming a popular faith. Through this development he attempts to use history and make his model an heir of the Roman Christian tradition. This, he believes, is the tradition that will meet the crisis of his day and Gildas uses this tradition as a means of mission to encourage the British to face the onslaught of the pagan political forces. It is the beginnings of a Celtic tradition as it engages with the era that has become known as the Celtic Christian era of British history, and it conforms to, and perhaps originates the model, which is clearly part of the Celtic Tradition.

Bede continues the work of Gildas, and is able to develop the tradition focusing on the practice of the Celtic saints as the model. The Crisis for Bede is the Church, in the new

political era of the establishment and consolidation of Saxon political rule in England. He sees the church in England of the eighth century as having succumbed to the temptations of wealth and ease that have been brought about through the stabilising of the political situation. While wanting to claim that England was Christian it is also clear that paganism and superstition were still being practised by the people<sup>405</sup>. The church was either unable to or unwilling to deal with these issues, and was more concerned with its own institution and life. In Bede's presentation of the situation we may be able to interpret that the church was finding it difficult to relate to the reality of the situation of the majority of the population of England. To meet the needs of the time, the church needed to re-evaluate its life and spirituality.

Consequently Bede re-invents the Celtic Tradition as a model for his time. The Tradition that he presents is one of a Golden age of spirituality, where the Christian is judged not simply by his conformity to doctrine, but the way his faith is lived out. Bede is concerned about orthopraxis as well as orthodoxy. The Celtic tradition is presented as one that is a model for asceticism, piety, humility, love, prayer and evangelism. The lives of the saints are the examples of this. Bede seems almost consciously to be building a tradition for he is selective in his approach to the historic material, and he puts his own interpretation upon it so that his mission and use of the tradition is to encourage a new practise of faith in England.

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<sup>405</sup> H.E.

### 4.3. The Continuing Use of the Tradition

Bede and to a lesser extent Gildas have given us a model of the re-invention of the Celtic tradition as a useful tool to address the needs of a society or church in crisis. Evidence for the use of this Celtic Tradition can also be found throughout the history of Britain and particularly of England.

The growth of interest in the Arthurian legends and cycles in the early medieval period coincides with the development of the imposition and oppression of the Saxon and Welsh people by the Norman overlords. From the time of the period of the Conquest the Saxon peoples of England found themselves in a similar position to the British people of the 6th century. The Arthurian legends helped to provide a myth of resistance to the political developments and at the same time a means of dealing with them. The legends were appropriated by both oppressor and oppressed to produce a tradition and myth that would serve the new cultural era<sup>406</sup>. Hence the romantic, chivalry of the medieval period developed.

Likewise out of the turmoil of the medieval era, when the Church and state became increasingly powerful, there was a major development of the lives of the saints. Hagiography is particularly a medieval literary skill<sup>407</sup>, and the Celtic tradition was in the forefront of this movement. It is from the 11th - 13th century that the majority of the lives of the saints arose, either as new documents or the rewriting of older material, either written or oral<sup>408</sup>. These lives become a means of providing a spirituality for the people that will allow them to become part of the new political and religious order, subject to it and yet at the same time religiously fulfilled. We see, then the use of the Celtic Tradition to develop an "alternative" Christianity in the face of a growing institutionalisation, power and uniformity of the European Church. This alternative was primarily an alternative expression of Christianity, or spirituality, which would not challenge the powerful Church but provide a popular Christianity. The Hagiographies were also part of the ecclesiastical political manoeuvrings to establish influence and power over large areas of England and Wales at this time<sup>409</sup>. Again we see the Celtic Tradition being re-invented and used at a time of change and crisis to meet the needs of the particular time. The use of the Celtic Tradition in terms of evidence of support for power struggles within the Church is a development of the Tradition that Bede used, and it continues to be a significant use of the Tradition to the present day.

Aspects of the Celtic Tradition were used by Henry Tudor in the 15th Century to establish himself as a "Welsh" prince with the heritage of antiquity, so guaranteeing him support from a large section of the population that were dissatisfied with the continuing struggles in England. He raised his standard of the red Dragon in Wales and defeated the white dragon of England. The Tudor era is often considered to be the beginning of Modern England, taking the nation into the new era of exploration, commerce and into the new

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<sup>406</sup> Evans D. Simon (ed) *Doble G.H. : Lives of the Welsh Saints*, 2nd ed., Cardiff, University of Wales Press, 1993 p 12.

<sup>407</sup> Delehage H. *The Legends of the Saints*, London, Longmans, 1907 (tr. V.M. Crawford), p 16.

<sup>408</sup> Doble *op cit.* p 10, 12.

<sup>409</sup> Smith J.M.H. *Early Medieval Hagiography in the late 20th century* in Brown T.S. (ed) et al *Early Medieval Europe*, vol 1, number 1, London, Longmans, 1992, p 71 and Doble *op cit.*

ideologies and worldviews of the modern era. This new era was the paradigm of the Protestant Reformation<sup>410</sup>. The general distrust of tradition led the Reformers to develop a very strongly based Biblical tradition of Puritanism. The basis of this tradition was the re-invention of the early church found in the interpretation of the New Testament material. England had moved on to a literary era where the oral traditions of the past were suspect and so one cannot expect much reference to the Celtic Tradition<sup>411</sup>.

Later Protestantism does however make use of the Celtic tradition when it is used as propaganda against the Roman Catholic Church. This seems to re-emerge again in the late 19th century<sup>412</sup> and early 20th century, when Roman Catholicism achieved significant growth and increasing influence in England and Wales. With the emancipation of the Roman Catholics in 1829 and the mass immigration of the Irish in 1848 the Roman Catholic Church was substantially strengthened and started to reorganise itself. This coincided with the Oxford movement, which was perceived as a great threat to Protestantism in England and gave rise to the publishing of material which was anti-Catholic in nature. Some authors made use of the Celtic Tradition in their attacks on the Roman Catholic Church. The main development of their argument centred on two aspects. The first was to re-develop the tradition of an apostolic foundation of the Church in Britain<sup>413</sup>, through the retelling of the various traditions of Caractacus and Paul, Joseph of Arimathea, and King Lucius. Thus establishing a tradition of an independent church in Britain derived from Paul and other apostles but unrelated to Rome and the apostle Peter. The second strand of the argument centred on the Celtic Church itself, as a separate development, that was related to the Church in Gaul, but not of Rome. Davies<sup>414</sup> produced a very interesting book in 1924 savagely attacking the Roman Catholic Archbishop of Cardiff who was claiming that the Celtic Church always continued in communion with the Church of Rome. Such use of the Celtic Church in support of the Roman Catholic cause obviously antagonised Davies and his book is a vehicle for an attack on the Roman Catholic Church and a defence of Protestantism. Although he does not make the claim

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<sup>410</sup> Bosch, D. J., *Transforming Mission*, New York, Orbis, 1991, p 239.

<sup>411</sup> Yet it is worth noting that Foxe in his *History of Christian Martyrs* does make a reference to the Celtic Church in Britain. This is found in the section where he addresses the Augustinian mission to Britain, stating clearly that the Church existed in Britain long before his arrival. He even goes on to say: The Protestant Church in England is the lineal descendant of the Church in Britain (Marie Gentert King (ed) *Foxes Book of Martyrs*, New Jersey, Fleming H. Revell Company, 1977 p 132).

This is part of his propaganda against the Roman Catholic Church, and he implies that the Celtic Church is the real forerunner of the Protestant church, and that it does not owe its existence to the Catholic Tradition.

<sup>412</sup> The 19th century was also important for the development of the Celtic Tradition as it was the period that saw the flowering of Romanticism and consequently the re-discovery of the Celtic period of British History. It is to this period that the present interest in Celtic studies is ultimately derived. While the Defence of Protestantism in the face of the growing Roman Catholic Church was one development of the Tradition, the other development that took place was with in relation to the growing interest in foreign mission.

<sup>413</sup> For example Morgan, R.W. *St. Paul in Britain*, London, Coenant Publishing Company, 1860. In the preface he writes: that the early Christian history of Britain "is sufficient to demonstrate the untenableness of the supposition that Britain is indebted to Germany - a country which has never itself been free - for its free institutions, or to Italy for its Gospel faith. The leading principles of her laws and liberties are of pure indigenous growth; and her evangelical faith was received by her directly from Jerusalem and the East, from the lips of the first disciples of Christ"; Jones, D.D. *The Early Cymry and their Church*, Carmarthen, W. Spurrell & Sons, 1910; Lewis, Lionel Smithett *St Joseph of Arimathea at Glastonbury or The Apostolic Church of Britain* London, A.R. Mowbray, first published in 1922.

<sup>414</sup> Davies D. *The Ancient Celtic Church and the See of Rome*, Cardiff, William Lewis, 1924.

that the Celtic Church was Protestant in nature he does proclaim that it was akin to the Protestant Church in that it was savagely attacked and despised by the Roman Catholic Church and that it was more authentic in its nature than the Catholic Church. In this sense he understands it as enshrining the same values as the Protestant Church.

The second use of the Celtic Tradition that is particularly seen to develop in the late nineteenth century and continued into the mid twentieth century is in support of foreign missions. Thomas<sup>415</sup> attempted to gain some authenticity and antiquity for the Church in Wales, possibly in the face of the growth of non-conformity by claiming a missionary power for the diocese which is related back to Kentigen. He writes<sup>416</sup>:

The Institution founded by Kentigen soon attained a high repute. Partaking of the nature of a missionary colony, something like the Universities Mission to Central Africa, and combining in its scheme not only the offices of Religion, but also the several duties of education, husbandry, and handicrafts, it drew together a large number of members ...

Besides this they would follow the common practice of the church at the time, and extend their missionary labours over the surrounding district, either setting up a cross to mark their stations, or else taking advantage of the periodical gatherings of the people at the wells, which they gradually appropriated to Christian uses; until the liberality of the individuals or the increasing wealth of the Church, enabled them to erect *capaellae* near the spots, the prototypes in character and purpose of the chapels of ease, and of the school and mission churches of our own day.

It is clear that Thomas is interpreting the events of the past in the light of contemporary practises and so understands the Tradition to be a missionary tradition. In his case he relates it to the work of the Universities Mission to Central Africa, and so both authenticates his claims for the church and the methods that the missionary society was using in the second half of the nineteenth century. Mrs Charles<sup>417</sup> surveys the lives and work of a number of saints, mostly Celtic in an attempt to encourage her readers to return to a faith in Christ that is deeper than the divisions of the Church of her day. She considers this faith to be inherently missionary and relates the saints of the eighth century to the missionaries of her day.

To-day saints as true as Patrick and Columba and Aidan are still given us; for instance, the little girl, who at twelve years old, seeing a poor drunken man guarded through the streets by the police, and mocked at by the crowd, thought only how lonely he must be, and walked along the street beside him with her hoop and stick - and afterwards spent her whole life in walking beside the lowest and lowliest to save them - has but just left us.

And still we have Martyrs as devoted as Boniface. Many amongst us have touched the hands and heard the voices of men who, in Africa, in India, in the

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<sup>415</sup> Thomas, D.R. *A History of the Diocese of St. Asaph*, London, 1870.

<sup>416</sup> *ibid.* p 5.

<sup>417</sup> Charles, R. *Early Christian Missions of Ireland, Scotland and England* , London, SPCK, 1893.

South Seas, have given their lives for Christ the Redeemer, and to carry on His redemption in the world.<sup>418</sup>

Mission is for her, both at home and overseas. Yet others understand the Celtic Tradition to be a model for Imperialistic mission. Browne makes a very interesting comment in his lecture<sup>419</sup> as part of his discussion of the Church in Britain during the early Roman period. He postulates that the revolt of Boudicca could have been the inspiration for St. Paul to have wanted to visit Britain to bring "the gentle doctrines of Christ"<sup>420</sup>. For Boudicca and her allies were laying waste to the civilised, imperial cities of Roman Britain, which were the means of spreading the gospel. He compares this to the Matabele rebellion of 1893 and in particular the events of the Shangani Patrol and the death of the Wilson patrol, where the story was spread that they died under the spears of the impis singing hymns and the National Anthem<sup>421</sup>.

The use of the Celtic Tradition for the encouragement of Missionary endeavours continues into the 1960's where many of the "popular" writings about the Celtic Christian period focus on the saints as primarily missionary in nature. By then, however there was a growing embarrassment about the connection between British imperialism and Mission<sup>422</sup> and so the Celtic saints are contrasted with Augustine, who as the imperialist is out of favour. In its stead the Celtic Saints become a model for what might be considered an incarnational and contextual style of mission. Foster designs his model for mission from the Celtic saints as a fivefold concept<sup>423</sup>. The saints built a base for mission in their monasteries, used the method of public preaching for evangelism, trained "native" clergy, were an example of the Christian life and preached the simple gospel. It is also interesting to note that in referring to Bede, he makes his own translation, so that what is currently translated as "Bishop", he translates as "missionary"<sup>424</sup>.

But by the middle of the century there was the beginning of the move away from the Celtic Tradition being a model for mission to being a model for a personal spirituality<sup>425</sup>. The embarrassment with overtly Christian mission in the post-war period that focused on

<sup>418</sup> *ibid.* p 423. The "little girl" she refers to is Catherine Booth. It is also noteworthy that she considers the overseas missionaries to be men, and does not include the vast number of women who also gave their lives to this work. This is in contrast to Foster who emphasises the role of Women in Mission, both in the Celtic era and the "present day".

<sup>419</sup> Printed in : Browne, G.F. *The Christian Church in These Islands Before the Coming of Augustine*, London, SPCK, 1894.

<sup>420</sup> *ibid.* p 53.

<sup>421</sup> This story is investigated in Cary R. *A Time to Die*, Cape Town, Howard Timmins, 1969, where the author suggests that the band of men under Major Wilson's command were really singing "barrack" songs to give themselves courage, but the Ndebele assumed that they were religious songs. Of course the interpretation of the day was that the Matabele impis were the agents of heathenism and that the British and Colonial forces in Rhodesia were the upholders of Christian civilisation.

<sup>422</sup> Foster J., *They Converted Our Ancestors*, London, SCM, 1965, p 118.

<sup>423</sup> *ibid.* p 97.

<sup>424</sup> for example translating Bede III, 3, Foster *op cit.* (p99) writes "the missionary preaching the gospel" and Shirley-Price reads "while the Bishop preached the gospel", and where Foster writes "From then on many Scots missionaries began to come and to preach with great devotion.." Shirley-Price writes "Henceforth many Scots arrived day by day ... preaching the Word of God". McClure and Collins (McClure J & Collins R. *Bede: The Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1994) agree with the translation of Shirley-Price.

<sup>425</sup> e.g. Leatham D *They Built on Rock*, Glasgow, The Celtic Art Society, 1948 and *Celtic Sunrise: An Outline of Celtic Christianity*, London, Hodder & Stoughton, 1951 and Duckett E. *The Wandering Saints*, London, Catholic Book Club, 1960.

the social Gospel and the general uncertainty of the Christian faith in the face of the forces of science and secularism, and a growing awareness of the religious plurality of society in Britain influenced the move to the privatisation of Religion and the concern for individual spirituality. This was a means that the Church used to deal with the crisis of the day and the Celtic Tradition came to its aid. To some extent this has always been part of the tradition, which is derived from the "Lives of the Saints", but comes much more to the fore in the second half of the twentieth century. It is this aspect of the tradition that is being so strongly emphasised in the present day interest in the revival of the Celtic Tradition.

## 4.4. The Contemporary Expression of the Celtic Tradition

Our very brief survey of the material relating to the rediscovery of the Celtic Tradition throughout the last 1500 years of British history has shown that the rise in interest of the subject coincides with certain times of crisis in the life of the church. These crises represent the struggle of the Church in dealing with new cultural situations that some scholars would understand as paradigm shifts. The present is understood by some missiologies<sup>426</sup> and many sociologists as such a moment of paradigm shift. If our theory is correct then the present rise in interest in all things Celtic will not only support this idea that the present is perceived as a major crisis in the life of the church and the culture of the West, but also will be seen as a response to this changing situation.

The main body of this thesis contains a survey and analysis of the material concerning Celtic Christianity and Spirituality that has been published over the past five years<sup>427</sup>. Throughout that survey it was also clear that the authors understood that their presentations and understandings of the Celtic Tradition helped to address some of the concerns of the present crisis that was affecting the Church. This change in culture and worldview has been called Post-modern<sup>428</sup>.

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<sup>426</sup> Bosch D. J. *Transforming Mission*, New York, Orbis, 1991.

<sup>427</sup> With a brief excursion into the past ten years of the publications of Shirley Toulson.

<sup>428</sup> The understanding of Post-modernism in this thesis is derived from a survey of the works of Harvey D. *The condition of Post-modernity: an enquiry into the Origins of cultural change*, Oxford, Basil Blackwell, 1983; Connor S. *Postmodernist Culture: An introduction to theories of the Contemporary*, Oxford, Basil Blackwell, 1989; Strinati D. *An Introduction to the Theories of Popular Culture*, London, Routledge, 1995; McRobbie Angela *Postmodernism and Popular Culture*, London, Routledge, 1994 and Griffin D.R. *God and Religion in the Postmodern World* New York, State University of New York Press, 1988.

A Post-modernist approach to religion will draw upon the post-modern characteristics. The rejection of the metanarrative will be worked out in a number of ways. First there will be a general distrust of received Truth claims, and this must reflect on the nature of Scripture as revelation. Rather it will be perceived as a compendium of experiences of the Divine. It becomes a resource, as any narrative that can be exploited for the convenience of the individual. The acceptance of a pluralism recognising the value of all and any religious narrative will reduce the claim of any one particular scripture. Hence no scripture or religious Tradition can claim a commitment from the individual or claim a universal significance. Watson (Watson F. *Text, Church and World: Biblical Interpretation in Theological Perspective*, Edinburgh, T & T Clark, 1994, p 134) says: "The experiential-expressionist approach tends to suggest that the various religions are symbolisations of the same core experience of the Ultimate, and that they must therefore respect and learn from each other."

Second, the emphasis on the need for local stories and narratives will give rise to a plethora of local theologies and traditions, which will focus on a particular concern or issue, such as has been seen in the expansion of "liberation" and contextual theologies. Third, there results a rejection of historic and institutionalised Religion, so that post-modern religion will not be concerned with the historic church, and indeed will reject it and its authority.

The starting point of any theology or tradition moves from the received wisdom of the ages to the experience of the individual; it rejects the certainty and centrality of dogma and authority and looks for change and the need to respond to change (Schreiter R.J. *Constructing Local Theologies*, London, SCM, 1985, p 24 - 26). Religion will instead be understood and expressed through experience and relationship. God will be experienced through more superficial and sensory means than the cognitive, so image, picture, aesthetics and creation will become the means of discerning the divine. Relying upon experiences and the senses creation becomes the ultimate reality. The parapsychological approach, resulting in the ready acceptance of a spirit world as part of the created order, will become determinative for religion.



The Post-modern culture is characterised as being a consumerist culture, Post-modern culture which is "eclectic"<sup>429</sup>, "pick and mix"<sup>430</sup>, "recyclic"<sup>431</sup> and "wallowing in change"<sup>432</sup>. The rejection of metanarratives is a rejection of system and so culture becomes a supermarket shelf. The metanarratives, history and all academic systems are plundered as resources for entertainment and experience and the images and concepts plucked out are removed from any context and reduced to a commodity to be used. This is considered by Harvey<sup>433</sup> to be the "deconstruction" method of Post-modernism, which allows any text to be given new meaning as the meaning is separated from the sign. This deconstruction method is available for all people. With a rejection of metanarratives there is a rejection of those who are involved in the perpetuation of them. Hence Holland<sup>434</sup> understands that Post-modern culture is a "Do It Yourself" culture, because technology has provided the means for a return to "home industry". Thus the greatest influence will be the rejection of the metanarratives, the emphasis on experience over above received knowledge and cognitive faith, and a focus on individuality rather than community particularly in terms of relationships.

The emphasis of a post-modern culture is to focus upon minority or marginal groups at the expense of the status quo. This is evidenced in the authenticating of activist groups for free expression of their differences and a demand for their acceptance. It is the celebration of multiplicity, diversity and difference. This also explains the characteristic of ultra individualism that would understand that society is made up of a collection of individuals. The post-Modern paradigm, then, is very appropriate for a re-invention of tradition, and provides the process for the development of Tradition.

The contemporary re-invention of the Celtic Tradition, drawing together the strands of romanticism, eclecticism, awareness of the sensory, experiential and individualism in spiritual searching, is very much a method for the Post-modern era. It is presented as a "popular" spirituality in which all people can participate because it does not draw hard boundaries around acceptable ways in which faith can be experienced or expressed. The individual is allowed a greater freedom than the institution of the Church or its creeds will permit. It meets the people "where they are."

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Focusing on the sensory God is experienced as immanent rather than transcendent. Relationship with God will not be one of commitment or an obedience, but rather understood in terms of a co-operating relationship. As such God will have a different place and mode of operation in the universe. As an immanent creator, God is understood to be continually in his creation (panentheism), continually creating and therefore influencing all events, and the concept of creation is understood as creation bringing order out of chaos. A transcendent God may create "ex nihilo" but not so an immanent God. Consequently there is a rejection of an anthropocentric approach to religion and an understanding that all life has experience and suffering and therefore a relationship with God. All creation is sacred.

<sup>429</sup> Sarup *op cit*; Harvey *op cit*; Featherstone *op cit*; Gellner E. *Postmodernism, Reason and Religion*, London, Routledge, 1992; Connor S. *op.cit*.

<sup>430</sup> McRobbie *op cit*.

<sup>431</sup> McRobbie *op cit*., Connor *op cit*., Strinati *op cit*.

<sup>432</sup> Harvey *op cit*. p 44.

<sup>433</sup> *ibid*. p 51.

<sup>434</sup> Holland J ; *Family, Wok and Culture: A Postmodern recovery of holiness* in Griffin D. R. (ed) *Sacred Interconnections: Postmodern Spirituality, Political economy and Art*. New York, State University of New York Press, 1990.

Of necessity, this thesis has been of a limited and general nature and it has not been possible to deal in great detail with each author presented, and there are some authors who have been omitted from the study. However the thesis has been able to begin the process of critical analysis of the contemporary authors and their presentation of the Celtic Tradition, as desired by Mackey<sup>435</sup>. It has shown that there is a correlation between the Celtic Tradition and the Post-modern ideas, although there is room for much more work and study in this area. Likewise, the thesis points to aspects of the Celtic Tradition that need further study. The development of the Tradition in the period between the eighth and nineteenth centuries has yet to be fully explored and in particular the influence of the Celtic Tradition on the two important historic events of the Reformation and the development of the modern missionary movement.

Secondly, the resurgence of popular belief and folk religion that recognises the value of holy places and spaces, the experience of the supernatural and the spiritual world is undoubtedly part of the milieu that has given rise to the resurgence of the Celtic tradition. Investigation, study and analysis of personal experience and faith stories related to the Celtic Tradition would complement the work of this thesis.

In conclusion, then, we have seen that the Celtic Tradition has been presented as an alternative to Church, which is historic, institutionalised and controlled by dogma and creeds and a professionally dominated religion. This rejection is consistent with the Post-modernist's rejection of the place of metanarratives in society and worldviews. This new approach to fundamental statements of truth and belief have severely threatened the very structure and foundation of the Church, though not necessarily of Christianity.

The Celtic material of the past is rapidly being made available to the public through the paperback press, which not only provides access to the written source material but also gives interpretation for the present context. Much of this material, as we have seen is interpreted through the experience of the authors, and this is presented as the method of developing a new spirituality. Likewise the rise in interest of pilgrimage to Celtic and other holy places has allowed the Celtic Tradition to re-affirm the importance of holy place and space outside of Church buildings. Holy space is again part of the public domain, and accessible to all who want to search for a spirituality. The recognition of the value of such holy space is not just geographical but is also personal for every experience can become a holy space. Consequently the reinvention of the Celtic Tradition affirms the spirituality of the "common people" which can be linked historically to the spiritual roots of the people.<sup>436</sup>

The Celtic Tradition affirms the immanence of God in all aspects of life and creation allowing all creation to be understood as sacrament and therefore holy. It speaks to those concerned for the renewal of the earth and ecological concerns. This also is an expression of the theology that removes human relationship with God from the confines of the Church and sets it free to be expressed in any and all areas of life. The Iona Community has understood the Celtic tradition to emphasise this strongly such that its beginnings were in the inner city of Glasgow and an attempt to bring the professional clergy and the laity

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<sup>435</sup> Mackey J.P. *An Introduction to Celtic Christianity*, Edinburgh, T & T Clark, 1989, p 21.

<sup>436</sup> Such Holy spaces and spiritual roots are experienced in places like Lindisfarne, Bardsey Island and Iona, which many would accept as traditional holy places long before the advent of Christianity into Britain.

closer together. David Adam also developed his Neo-Celtic tradition in the mission situation of the inner, industrialised city.

But above all the re-invention of the Celtic tradition provides an important new method for mission. Being centred on experience rather than doctrine, it affirms the spirituality of the people by allowing it to be interpreted and reinterpreted with both the changing culture and the developing spirituality of the people. It has a built-in flexibility because the concept of the Celtic Tradition is little more than an umbrella term within which there can be a great deal of variety and selectivity. It is also able to hold together the paradox of Tradition, that it is both a human invention and inspired by God. This dual approach to Tradition enables it to be a process for the development of the relationship between the human and the Divine, that is expressed and understood in "everyday" terms, and not ecclesiastical formulations. It becomes a means of incarnating the Gospel into different contexts, by the reworking of the material and the tradition. It is a contextualised spirituality.

Therefore Celtic Theology is a new way of doing theology. It is eclectic by nature and therefore can reject metanarrative while at the same time accepting it. Celtic theology is a new approach that by definition cannot be systematised, for once it is systematised then it loses its very nature. It has to be the expression of Spirituality that cannot be held down by definitions and systems, and therefore it cannot be a theology<sup>437</sup>, which implies a system. Understood in this way the re-invention of the Celtic Tradition in the late 1980's and the 1990's has to be an invention for the Post-modern era to help to provide a model and process for a developing spirituality for the crisis of the changing paradigm

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<sup>437</sup> Theology is defined by the Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church (ed. F.L. Cross, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1974) as "Its purpose is the investigation of the contents of belief by means of reason enlightened by faith and the promotion of its deeper understanding." Macquarrie (Macquarrie J. Principles of Christian Theology, Revised edition, London, SCM 1978 p 1) says "Theology may be defined as the study which, through participation in and reflection upon a religious faith, seeks to express the content of this faith in the clearest and most coherent language available."

## 5. EPILOGUE

This thesis has shown that the current interest in Celtic Spirituality and the Celtic Tradition is part of a process which has developed over nearly two centuries. This process is a good example of the development of a tradition for a particular culture and context. The Celtic Tradition is seen to have its roots in a period of crisis of the sixth century when the British people were being harassed by the invading Saxons.

Gildas encouraged his readers and fellow citizens, whom he considers are Christian by heritage, to a renewed spirituality that will enable them to face and conquer the heathens who were invading the land and religion. He built his tradition by presenting the era of Imperial Rome in Britain as a golden age of culture society and Christianity. This he rebuilds for his crisis.

Bede develops the tradition for his own period of crisis which relates to a time of complacency within England when political and religious peace had been achieved. The old Heroic Age of faith and culture had passed and the country needed a new type of spirituality to meet the new era. Consequently Bede develops the Celtic tradition for his own aims of purifying the Church that had become lax and immoral.

This Tradition, it has been shown has continually been developed and re-invented throughout the centuries to the present day. The present surge in interest in all things Celtic, in the western world, and a renewed interest in Celtic spirituality in the Church in Britain is postulated as relating to the period of crisis that has invaded both church and society. This change, which may be called a paradigm shift to the post-Modern era, has brought with it a rejection of the history, metanarratives and the logical/reasoning approach of the worldviews and ideals of the Modern era. In its place an individualised, market materialism has become the groundwork of life and culture. Epitomised as living with an eclectic and "pick and mix" culture and ideology, the post-Modernist is understood to have rejected the institutionalised church with its doctrines and creeds, as unable to address the contemporary era.

The publications about Celtic Spirituality that have been reviewed as examples and illustrations of material that has been produced, have been shown to follow the methods used by Gildas and Bede to develop a new spirituality for a new age. The Celtic Tradition has become a major source for this new spirituality. It is presented as relating to a golden age of Christianity that emphasises the experiential rather than the dogmatic, is anti-Modernist, holistic, eclectic and romantic. Consequently it can be seen that neo-Celtic spirituality is an alternative Christianity to that of the Institutionalised Church.

Of necessity, this thesis has been of a limited and general nature and it has not been possible to deal in great detail with each author presented, and there are some authors who have been omitted from the study. However the thesis has been able to begin the process of critical analysis of the contemporary authors and their presentation of the Celtic Tradition, as desired by Mackey. It has shown that there is a correlation between the

neo-Celtic tradition and the post-Modern ideas, although there is room for much more work and study in this area.

Likewise, the thesis points to aspects of the Celtic tradition that need further study. The development of the Tradition in the period between the eighth and nineteenth centuries has yet to be fully explored and in particular the influence of the Celtic Tradition on the two important historic events of the Reformation and the development of the modern missionary movement.

Finally, the resurgence of popular belief and folk religion that recognises the value of holy places and spaces, the experience of the supernatural and the spiritual world is undoubtedly part of the milieu that has given rise to the resurgence of the Celtic tradition. Investigation, study and analysis of personal experience and faith stories related to the Celtic Tradition would complement the work of this thesis.

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