CELTIC CHRISTIANITY AND THE POSTMODERN SPIRITUAL QUEST

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Introduction

These days there is a fascination with things Celtic, whether in music, art, literature, or film. A recent family outing to a Celtic Festival reinforced for me how pervasive the interest in matters Celtic is in North America and in how eclectic a manner that interest is manifested. For as well as the staple and obligatory musical offerings (that seemed to gravitate between high-energy and deep melancholic strains!), there were booths selling crafts, food, and books in addition to which there were instructional sessions in blacksmithing, flower-garland making, dancing skills, instrument construction, and language acquisition. By one estimate about 13,000 patrons attended the festival in one day. What accounts for this revival of interest at an academic and popular level in things Celtic in our postmodern world and why for some might this have a spiritual dimension?

Basic Questions

This paper seeks to explore three basic questions:

- Firstly, it seeks to explore whether there is a relationship between postmodernism and Celtic spirituality, and, if there is, to identify those themes within postmodern culture that resonate with Celtic spirituality.

- Secondly, if such a relationship exists, how does it tally with the historical reality of the Celtic spiritual tradition. How legitimate are the projections and assumptions made of that tradition?

- Thirdly, in what ways can Celtic spirituality be legitimately drawn upon in the service of the Church today as a means of engaging the spiritual needs of
Postmodern Dimension

It is no accident that the revival of interest in matters Celtic has occurred within the larger context of postmodern culture. There are definite points of convergence between postmodernism and Celtic spirituality, but this tells us more about the spiritual needs of postmodern culture than it does about Celtic spirituality. At the same time, it is clear that there are distinct emphases within the Celtic Christian tradition which, because of the points of convergence between it and postmodernism, can provide the Church with a useful bridge or witness to that culture.

It is important to provide a context for this interest both within and outside the Church by assessing the subject in a theological, biblical, and historical context that will do justice to the tradition itself and at the same time recognize the contemporary search for spirituality evident in our culture.

While there has been a large scale rejection of traditional religion in the wider culture, this is complemented by a search for the spiritual or sacred. This need is being filled by New Age type philosophies, science-as-religion, or exotic (e.g. Buddhist) or ancient (e.g. neo-pagan, Celtic) religions. A neo-romantic worldview permeates the exploration of ancient religions like that of the Celts with a focus on respect for nature, coupled with a quest for a golden era predating modernity, motivated by a belief in the existence of the noble or pure Celt. Such a nostalgic worldview is drawn to the Celtic past by what it perceives as wholeness and harmony. In anthropological terms such an engagement with historic native or indigenous cultures can be seen as a means of viewing the local or particular as possessing the potential to be universal. As expressed by Shweder:

> Going native amounts to travelling abroad or across ethnic boundaries to find some suppressed
aspect of the self valued and on public display in another land or neighbourhood, which one can then bring back as theoretical or cultural critique.¹

In this context, there are distinctive ways in which the Celtic tradition appeals to contemporary culture. This culture is characterized by a number of distinct features which together point to a spiritual crisis and search.² These include the fact that we live in a post-rationalist world where the Enlightenment confidence in reason, progress, and scientism no longer prevails. In this context a spirituality deriving from the Celtic world has an appeal because that culture laid stress on the imagination, the intuitive, and the nearness of the spiritual realm or the incarnational. An apparent pre-rational, intuitive element in Celtic spirituality thus appeals: illustrated, for example, by the interlacing and spirals in the Book of Kells (a copy of the four gospels in Latin dating to c.800 AD), and the carefree journeying of the monks which built on pre-Christian precedents.

The postmodern generation is one that articulates a sense of betrayal because it feels it will not attain the prosperity, security, and fulfilment that previous generations did. Deriving from this some see in the Celtic world either a society of intimate communities embodying security, intimacy and reliance; or a society which, in its monastic culture, included the practice of exile, journeying and pilgrimage which involved a risky casting oneself adrift on the world and is thus appealing to postmodern insecurities in an empathetic way.


² For identification of these features see B.Walsh, “The Church in a postmodern age: ten things you need to know” Good Idea 3:4 (Winter, 1996), 1-5.
Postmodern culture supports religious pluralism in that it is a pick-and-mix culture which sees the selection of whatever seems appealing from different faiths and beliefs as legitimate in the process of obtaining a spiritual identity. Celtic spirituality becomes one option in this plurality of choices which combine to constitute one's faith; in this instance, its difference, earthiness and marginality being appealing and defining features. Boundaries between doctrine and distance in historical time are not seen as necessarily inhibiting factors in this assembling of one's spiritual make-up. Because the Celts were not heavily doctrinal or theological, and saw no division between the sacred and the secular, their spirituality has an appeal on this account also. Other boundaries are also eliminated in this spiritual quest. Thus because postmodernists efface the boundary between past and present, Celtic spirituality is appropriated and brought into the present as a living, immediate experience.

The desire for a post-individualistic, communal context to life is prominent in postmodern culture because the social dimension to existence is seen as the solution to the alienation and isolation of self seen as a characteristic consequence of modernity. In reaction to Enlightenment claims to the attainability of universal truth, postmodernists assert that truth becomes relative and specific to the community or locality in which it is generated. (In this regard the film *The Waking of Ned Devine* (Ireland, 1999) is postmodern). Community is crucial to the process of knowing and to identity formation. The Celtic countries, both historic and contemporary, appeal to the postmodern person because they are perceived to embody tightly-knit, intimate communities which establish their own norms of truth and practice. The emphasis on family, kin, clan or tribe is regarded as furnishing the model whereby the identity of the individual is
formed and protected, and in which knowledge and truth are generated in a communal context.

The communal dimension is important also because postmodernism is suspicious of all grand narratives or stories whether these be utopian marxism, technological confidence, capitalism, or religion. Rather than being the vehicles to liberation, these have proven to be the instruments of oppression and domination. All forms or expressions of metanarratives or worldviews, therefore, are suspect because the grand claims they make are seen as contributory to oppression. Christianity is one such metanarrative which postmodernists are dismissive of. But Celtic Spirituality attracts because it is not a narrowly nationalist interest emanating from the Celtic countries themselves, rather there is a wide, particularly North American, interest. Second, the interest is cross-denominational. These attributes serve to defend Celtic Christianity against the charge of being a totalizing metanarrative.

Even in a cultural sense, the Celtic tradition generally has a certain appeal because, firstly, it laid no claim to a dominant worldview, rather on Continental Europe and Britain south of Hadrian's Wall, it was a victim of a Roman imperial worldview and hence wins the sympathy of postmodernists. Conversely, those areas untouched by Roman legions, i.e. Ireland and Scotland, are lauded for surviving with their own local narratives relatively intact. In a contrast, with the decline of the Roman Empire, Continental Christianity became increasingly materialistic and decadent by assuming the structure of the empire it served. Culturally, therefore, the Celtic world is viewed as a local narrative which in the early centuries avoided the appropriating nature of the Roman grand narrative. In succeeding centuries the Celtic local narrative struggled with

3 Stanley J. Grentz, *A primer on postmodernism* (Grand Rapids, 1996), 168.
the British colonial metanarrative. That the Celtic view has survived and now thrives, contrasts with the current identity crisis among the British and their guilt complex about their imperial past. All this serves to validate the Celtic worldview in the eyes of the postmodernist.

Secondly, the Celtic Christian world attracts because it is seen as a local expression, even deviation from, the universalist norms of the Christian Church in the early centuries. This found expression in its apparent ecological sensitivity, its high regard for the role of women in Church life, its celebration of human creativity, its sensitivity to indigenous cultures, and its lack of hierarchical structures. Thus both secularists and Christians are attracted and sympathetic to the Celtic tradition (pagan and Christian) as a local expression or narrative that deviated from or challenged a dominant worldview (whether Roman, British, or Christian).

Postmodern culture is characterized by fragmentation, reflected in a plurality of views and perspectives, and it eschews integration of the different elements in life. Yet postmodernists seek a more holistic view of life and truth with an emphasis on the affective and intuitive, as a means of counterbalancing the previous Enlightenment stress on reason.4

The quest for such wholeness is seen as an attempt to recover the spiritual dimension of life. The Celtic tradition attracts because of its holistic character in that a dualistic division between body and soul, the physical and spiritual, the eternal and the present, the sacred and the secular, did not operate. Yet a holistic view of life did not imply a

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4 Grenz, Primer, 14.
bland, uniform, or homogenous emphasis. For the Celtic Christian tradition at least allowed for a diversity of expression in different areas. Communally, there were the monasteries with their diverse but inclusive populations of ascetics, married monks, and craftspeople. Visually, there is the Book of Kells with its spiral patterns, interlacing, and profusion of detail on pages like fol.34v, the Chi-Rho page, where the detail for the letters of Christ's name in Greek (XPI) can not be contained within a rigid geometric pattern. Also the Celtic symbol of the Holy Spirit was the wild goose which contrasts with the normal one, that of the dove which is suggestive of domestication and passivity. The Celtic world appeals because it can seemingly embody ambiguity and diversity in unity.

The contemporary world is one that is increasingly media-saturated, virtual, simulated, and hyper-real. One of the over-riding needs of our culture is the desire for personal experience as a counterpoint to this virtual world. The Celtic tradition appeals because it is perceived to provide people with the real experience that they desire in a spiritual sense. It is seen as communal, relational, experiential, and earthy in which people can have a real experience of getting in touch with deep spiritual needs. Unspoiled landscapes and a vibrant natural world are attractive and appealing in an elemental way, and are seen to fulfil and refresh people with meaningful experiences. A contemporary example of this is the experience of the Alpha program, the success of which is partly based on the idea of a meal shared in community. It provides people with a real human experience of interacting in safe supportive environment where at the same time they can allow themselves to be vulnerable.

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Postmodernity seeks to uphold and respect the "other" by a rejection of the colonial, racist, and male-dominated experiences of history. Instead there is an acceptance and openness to those racially or ethnically different from ourselves. In particular such honouring of the other should express itself in hospitality. The Celtic world, both historic and contemporary, is seen as welcoming to the outsider and stranger. Hospitality was not only a Christian practice but it was also a requirement of secular law. The Christian faith as practised in the Celtic realms provides us with a model of how that faith adapted to the social structure of a rural society.

In seeking to honour the "other" postmodernists would advocate the removal of the patriarchal oppression perpetuated in the institutions of society, in association with the disavowal of colonial and racist tendencies. Ancient Celtic society is viewed as one in which women had a more favourable position than in other societies, there being instances of female druids, for example. From a Church perspective the Celtic Christian church is seen as one that was inclusive of women's ministry and as one that had a positive attitude towards women generally. They would point to sayings like, "There is a mother's heart in the heart of God", and to the women leaders of the church like Bridget and others, as exemplary of the Celtic affirmation of the feminine.

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8 A.M. Allchin & E. De Waal, *Threshold of light: prayers & praises from the Celtic tradition* (London,
Despite the reservations one must have about the wider culture appropriating elements of the Celtic past in an attempt to fulfill contemporary needs, Christians need not feel uncomfortable in doing so. The legacy from Celtic Christianity is impressive both in terms of its material remains (stone high crosses, metalworking, and illuminated gospel books), as well as a strong hymn tradition with such well-known ones as "Be Thou My Vision" and "St. Patrick's Breastplate" having found their way (in translation) into the mainstream of church hymn-singing.

The Celtic Christian heritage is a common one for the historic churches whose origins lay in the British Isles whether Roman Catholic, Anglican, or Presbyterian. While some in these different traditions see the revival of interest in Celtic Spirituality as marginal to the life and concerns of the modern Church; others see it as a gift of the Holy Spirit at a time of real need in the Church.

There exist key elements in the Celtic Christian legacy which orthodox Christians can feel confident upholding, while these and other elements lend themselves to articulation as a bridge to the wider contemporary culture. There are a number of examples one can choose to illustrate this potential.

Celtic Christians (and indeed their pagan forebears) saw the divine as immanent in the world. They were ever mindful and aware of God's presence especially in creation. This aspect appeals to contemporary neo-pagans who also seek to project the divine into all things even the self.\(^9\) While belief in God's immanence has been overstressed as an

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aspect of Celtic Christianity (to the neglect of recognizing an equal emphasis on God's transcendence, reflected in the refrain "High king of heaven" found in the hymn "Be Thou My Vision"), Christians need to give greater acknowledgement to God's presence in nature and develop a vibrant theology of creation that will be engaging to our world. There is much in Celtic spirituality that would assist in this task.

A second instance is church structure. The ecclesiastical structure that came to dominate the Celtic Church from the seventh-century was one based on the monastery rather than the typical diocesan model of the Continent. This reflected social structures, Ireland was a decentralized society and thus the monastery integrated well into localized power bases. Also monasteries were complex in their community structure and in the range of buildings and functions they included. Some would see the Celtic Church as a separate entity, outside the mainstream of Roman control. Certainly there were differences, notably over the dating of Easter and the style of the monastic tonsure, but these were not serious enough to justify the claim of a distinct church. The Church in the Celtic areas was part of the mainstream of Roman Christianity, and in no way sought to promote itself as institutionally separate. This aspect aside, there is an accompanying belief that in contrast to the bureaucratic nature of the modern Church, the Celtic Church functioned simply without stifling structures. This connects with the postmodern

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suspicion of all institutions, especially organized religion, as totalizing and controlling.\textsuperscript{12}

The modern charismatic and house-church movements have appropriated selective elements from the Celtic tradition in support of their functions. An example of this is to be found in R. Ellis & C. Seton, \textit{New Celts: Following Jesus into Millennium 3} which documents the experience of the authors' Revelation Church movement in England.\textsuperscript{13}

A third example, is the position of Celtic Christians in relation to culture. Some regard Celtic Christianity as valid because it absorbed into itself elements of the pagan culture. This syncretism is seen as positive and appeals to the stress on a plurality of choices espoused by postmodern culture. It also appeals because it provides a model of cultural engagement/ something that is perceived to be absent in the modern church where we typically find either of two extremes: a distancing from or non-engagement with the world leading to isolation, or a total absorption by the world that results in compromise. The Celtic Christian experience was neither of these. Rather it accepted elements of the pagan culture and transformed them for Christ. An example of this is the traditional Samhain festival, the chief source of the present-day celebration of Halloween.

The Celtic new year began on November 1st and was preceded by a festival that honoured Samhain, the Lord of the Dead, on the last day of the old year when he would

\\textsuperscript{12} Beaudoin, \textit{op.cit.}, 51-72.

unleash the souls of the dead. Since the festival marked the passing of the harvest and warm weather and the coming of winter, darkness and decay, it was associated with human death. On the evening of the festival, the druids (pagan shamans or priests) ordered the people to put out their hearth fires in order to ward off malevolent spirits, leaving the house completely dark. People then gathered at a central place where the druid built huge new year's bonfires of sacred oak branches and sacrificed animals, crops and possibly even human beings. During the ceremonies some wore costumes of animal heads, fortunes were told and other customs were observed to either honour the dead or protect oneself from evil spirits. At the end of the ceremony parts of the fire were taken back to one's home, and one's own fire in the hearth re-lit from the sacred fire as the new year dawned.

Celtic Christians did not treat paganism, the druids, or the world of the spirits as either imaginary or benign. They believed in taking back the darkness and the night. Thus they gathered to praise God in a service on Samhain eve. The churches would shine in the darkness as a beacon, showing they wished to take back every piece of territory from the evil one. They loved to take places of darkness over and make them hallowed ground. This illustrates the fact that because they lacked a view of the universe, Celtic Christians had a confidence in the victory of God and their approach to culture proceeded from that vantage point.

Another instance of cultural sensitivity or contextualization is the Trinity. The Celts in their pagan phase often expressed the divine in terms of triads or three-headed god or goddesses, so that they were receptive to the Christian doctrine of the Trinity. It became
the Celtic model for Christian community. Building on the postmodern quest for community and on the recognition of Celtic Christianity's trinitarian emphasis, the Church can engage postmodern culture by exemplifying that God seeks the establishment of community in the highest sense. The Trinity is a social entity and thus provides a relevant model of the individual in relationship.

A final instance relates to the offering of sacrifice (sometimes human) by the Celts to their fickle, unfriendly, terrifying gods. In contrast, the Christian God was loving, sought the deliverance of His people, and did not want them to feed Him with sacrifice. Rather, He sacrificed His only Son for our redemption, and wanted to feed us through His body and blood. No human sacrifice was needed again; rather we are to live for God and others.\(^{14}\)

The idea that a God would lay down His life for them, was awesome news for the Celts and depicts Christianity working effectively within their cultural referents for transformative effect. Thus the example of Celtic Christianity's relationship with the pagan culture it was in contact with provides a model of how the Church should be in creative and transformative tension with the culture around it.

In the area of environmentalism there are some commonalities of concern between postmodernists and Christians. Postmodernists maintain that adherence to the metanarratives of economism, progress and technicism have collectively been destructive of the world's environment. This forms part of the betrayal that this generation feels: not only are they not going to have the standard of living that previous generations had, but the legacy of earlier prosperity is industrialism and environmental

\(^{14}\) G. Hunter, *The Celtic way of evangelism: how Christianity can reach the west...again* (Nashville, 2000), 83.
disaster, making it a problem of enormous proportions, the solution to which requires the allocation of resources which otherwise might have been used to ensure the continuity of earlier living standards.

Christians feel guilty about this too as they are seen to have contributed to the destruction of nature which proceeded from an inadequate articulation of a theology of creation or, indeed, the entire absence of such. Life on earth is fragile and there is a need to cooperate with the earth. In contrast to this destructiveness the ancient Celts are seen as environmentally conscious, in touch with nature, respectful of the created order, and recognizing God's presence in nature. However, though Celtic Christians demonstrated a closeness to nature perhaps more so than their European counterparts of the time, there was nothing distinctively Celtic about appreciating God's presence in the natural world.  

Much of the interest in Celtic Christianity deriving from the needs of postmodern culture is in many ways a construct reflecting the superimposition these needs and their projection onto the past. The Celtic past of the early centuries is viewed and indulged in as a golden age of innocence, simplicity, and unspoilt beauty.

While postmodernity can be criticised for the selectivity with which it chooses certain features from the Celtic past to engage with and appropriate, and while there is some deviation in the application of such a selection, nevertheless such an interest represents a crucial bridge for Christians to cross over. Such an interest is to be commended as it opens people to receiving the message of the true God. This approach finds its biblical

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sanction in Acts 17:16-34 where Paul acknowledges the spiritual predisposition of the Athenians but transforms it for Christ. The Celts had the same approach in their evangelising efforts in that they affirmed the culture in which they found themselves and won it for Christ.

Celtic Christianity in its modern revived guise encompasses within itself a mixture of contemporary concerns (originating within and without the Church), and an historical dimension that embodies an apparently selective rediscovery of elements from the Celtic past.

There is a danger that proponents project onto the Celtic past a tableaux of their own needs which in many cases only has a superficial relationship to the actual past. With all these claims being made about the Celtic world by Christians and postmodernists alike, there is a clear danger of constructing a romanticized world which is more reflective of contemporary needs and concerns than what was actually present in that world itself.

Celtic Christianity provides us with a rich and orthodox legacy from which we can learn much about the nature of spirituality, relationships, trust in God, and devotional practices. One can recommend exploring this spiritual tradition for the rich spiritual insights it provides as long as these are consistent with Scripture. Discernment is critical but at the same time we must be open to the joy that Celtic spirituality has to offer.