

GAVIN WAKEFIELD

# Myths of Celtic Christianity

**Gavin Wakefield asks for a careful and critical re-think about what can and cannot be learnt from the historical church of the 'Celtic' peoples. He resists the concepts of a 'Celtic' and a 'Roman' church, describing instead the ways in which the many Christian groups of the time interacted and shared ideas, rituals and liturgies. He considers two specific claims for the Celtic Church: that it was creation-centred and female-affirming. He suggests 'that much in these emphases are a misinterpretation of historical evidence'. Finally he wonders why it is that these ideas have developed at this time, suggesting it is a mythical re-shaping of the past in changing times.**

Go into most large bookshops in this country and it is easy to find a substantial number of books on all kinds of spirituality and beliefs, from yoga to extra terrestrials, from Taoism to positive thinking, Kabbalah to Feng Shui and much much more. Within that range there are books with the word Celtic in the title, both pagan and Christian, spiritual and artistic. You can buy CDs of chants and songs, picture books and jewellery, crosses and reproduction manuscripts, all of them claiming to be part of our Celtic heritage. I visit our local Cathedral bookshop regularly and each time find yet another swathe of Christian titles with Celtic in there.

This article began life as part of a conference in Durham designed to provide some perspective on this 'Celtic' phenomenon, not to denigrate it all, but to see what we can with integrity learn from it.<sup>1</sup> My intention was to provoke some re-thinking about what can be learnt both from the historical church of Celtic peoples and from the current fascination in our society with things Celtic.

I begin with a few reflections on the use of 'myth' and then offer three cautions in the way we speak about 'Celtic Christianity'. I then illustrate my cautions with a more detailed discussion of two clusters of themes, namely the spirituality of creation and valuing the feminine, especially looking at how some popular writers have developed these themes. I conclude with some thoughts on why these myths have taken hold in our society.

Before reading further you might like to create your own list of words associated with 'Roman' and 'Celtic' expressions of church. I have found this to be an interesting group exercise on a number of occasions, and we shall return to such a list towards the end of the article.

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1 The Myth of Celtic Christianity, St John's College, Durham, September 2004.

## The role of myth/story

What is going on? There are some very committed and knowledgeable people making use of material from the 'Celtic Church', so why would anyone want to describe what is being produced as 'making myths'?<sup>2</sup> In what sense could it be fair to talk of myth, and does it matter?

In modern Bible translations we read that Timothy was exhorted to avoid 'godless and silly myths' and those who taught them (1 Tim 1:4 and 4:7). The Authorised Version called them 'fables' which is also indicative of the understanding of the word *mythois*. In popular usage myth is generally understood as a fictional tale, telling a story of dubious value. There is of course a further use of the word in modern scholarship: in this usage myths function either in explanatory roles or in reinforcing the beliefs or values of a society or group. It is in this sense that I want to talk about the myth of Celtic Christianity: I am suggesting that the telling of stories from these traditions is functioning as a way of legitimising certain contemporary actions and concepts as being within the Christian tradition, and I hope what I say about spirituality of creation and valuing the feminine will demonstrate this.

### Speaking cautiously

In assessing the use made of stories from the 'Celtic tradition' today there are hermeneutical issues to face and questions of genre and of history. Before examining individual stories employed by contemporary writers I want to identify three reasons why we should be cautious about even using the terms 'the Celtic Church' or 'Celtic Christianity'

#### *Caution 1: no single Celtic church*

Insofar as Celtic society (or societies) was non-hierarchical and loosely organised the church in Celtic lands was similarly loosely organised – there was no Celtic Pope or Celtic Curia, there were no specifically pan-Celtic synods. In other words, there was no central organisation of the churches that grew up in Celtic societies, other than that common to all Western churches, which was why Columba was happy to send a copy of his hymn *Altus Prosator* to Pope Gregory for comment.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, the term 'Celtic' only came into use in the eighteenth century and it was invented to describe a group of languages.<sup>4</sup> Aidan or Columba or Patrick would not have known what was meant by it.

#### *Caution 2: Celtic variations in time and space*

There were significant variations in organisation and theological emphases in time and space between the churches in what are imprecisely called the Celtic regions. There are major social, geographical and theological differences between, say, eleventh century Scotland and fifth century Brittany and seventh century Ireland. Once this is recognised, where are the boundaries of time and space to be drawn in identifying Celtic Christianity? Which 'Celtic Church' is being discussed?

2 From the sub title of Ian Bradley's book, *Celtic Christianity: Making Myths and Chasing Dreams* Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh 1999.

3 Ian Bradley, *Columba: Pilgrim and Penitent* Wild Goose Publications, Glasgow 1996, p 58.

4 An excellent discussion of the origins of 'Celtic' in eighteenth century linguistics and archaeology is given in Michael Morse, *How the Celts Came to Britain: Druids, Ancient Skulls and the Birth of Archaeology* Tempus, Stroud 2005.

*Caution 3: European variations in time and space*

It was not just the 'Celtic churches' which showed variations, but also the Continental churches in different regions, despite their notional allegiance to Rome. In the period we are mostly concerned with, generously perhaps the fifth to eleventh centuries, Popes and Rome were not what they became in the later Middle Ages. The variations of liturgy, emphasis and spirituality in 'Roman' churches overlap with those in 'Celtic' ones, which helps to explain the creative synthesis of traditions in late seventh century Northumbria after the Synod of Whitby. The Lindisfarne Gospels continue to bear witness to the creativity unleashed at that time through the synthesizing of several traditions.<sup>5</sup>

Each region developed particular features, some of which survived, others of which vanished as greater uniformity developed. For example, the Irish church developed a significant discipline of penance, which when codified in books of penance spread to other parts of Europe. In Spain, not part of the Celtic world of course, there was a particular theology of the eucharist as sacred object. In Gaul, the church developed double monasteries, that is of celibate men and women belonging to one house, a monastic concept which spread to England and elsewhere.

Throughout Europe in this period similarities and differences arose out of how the Bible and the tradition were inculturated. It may therefore be accurate to speak of distinctive themes in 'Celtic Christianity', but that is not the same as making it contrary to 'Roman Christianity', especially since it is hard to justify distinct entities in the first place. In this light we now examine specific ideas about creation and the feminine.

### Specific 'Celtic' myths

Within current Christian writing on things Celtic there are many themes brought out, each of them apparently connecting the historic Church with our own day. So Ian Bradley has six such themes including the Monastic Model, Penance and Pastoral Care, and Pilgrimage. Michael Mitton goes further with fourteen themes each linked to named saints, at least four of whom are not Celtic; his themes include holiness, community, creation, creativity and the ministry of women. More abundant still is Ray Simpson who touches on some twenty five themes; in addition to some mentioned already he includes a rhythm for work and worship, hospitality, the encircling three, the wild goose, signs and wonders, healing, and angels.<sup>6</sup>

Clearly these and other authors have found a rich source for reflection and there is much that is helpful in these publications. In order to offer some assessment of such reflections in a manageable article I have chosen two clusters of themes which I think are among the more important ones, namely spirituality of creation and valuing the feminine.

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5 Michelle P. Brown, *The Lindisfarne Gospels: Society, Spirituality and the Scribe* The British Library, London 2003

6 Respectively in Ian Bradley, *Colonies of heaven: Celtic models for today's Church* Darton, Longman and Todd, London 2000;

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Michael Mitton, *Restoring the Woven Cord: Strands of Celtic Christianity for the Church Today* Darton, Longman and Todd, London 1995; Ray Simpson, *Exploring Celtic Spirituality: Historic Roots for Our Future* Hodder and Stoughton, London 1995.

Beginning with primary quotations from historic sources I go on to discuss the ways in which this material has been appropriated in our times. I do this by quoting a few of the recent authors who have consciously drawn on their understanding of ‘Celtic Christianity’. In each section I first present some of the historical material that these authors are using. My assessment of the use and abuse of history comes later.

## Spirituality of Creation

It is ‘well known’ that Celtic Christianity was creation centred and holistic: as Esther de Waal wrote in the Preface to her inspiring book *A World Made Whole*: ‘This is an approach to life in which God breaks in on the ordinary, daily, mundane, earthy.’ And, ‘The greatest loss undoubtedly has been that of the Celtic understanding of creation.’<sup>7</sup> Within this Creation cluster I have selected three key themes:

### The goodness of the creation

The first theme is the goodness of creation which can be found in a number of authors; these two examples are illustrative of many more.

Ray Simpson in his chapter entitled ‘A Cherished Creation’ quotes Dafydd ap Gwilym, a fourteenth century Welsh poet, praising the thrush:<sup>8</sup>

‘What artist could possibly be sweeter than his soft whistling? At matins he reads three lessons to us all, wearing his feathered vestments. Far away across the lands his clear voice is heard as he cries out in the bushes. Prophet of the hillsides, stout author of man’s longing, bright poet laureate of woodland song, each splendid note he sings with his sweet vigour in the aisle of a little brook, each lovely verse in passion’s metre, each branch of music’s art, each song, each gentle knot he ties to please a girl who argues over what is best in love. A preacher, a reader of lessons; sweet, clear and pure is his muse ...’

Ian Bradley, in his first book on the subject of Celtic Christianity, *The Celtic Way*, headed a chapter ‘The Goodness of Nature’. He cited the artwork of the Celts as an exuberant celebration of creation, with animals and birds illustrating manuscripts in great profusion. He and other writers point to the beautiful Irish nature poetry as evidence of this attitude.<sup>9</sup> One poem often quoted is called in English Marban’s Hermitage:<sup>10</sup>

‘I have a sheiling in the wood, none knows it but my God  
An ash tree on the hither side, a hazel bush beyond,  
A huge old tree encompasses it ..  
A choice pure spring and princely water to drink.  
There spring water-cresses, yew berries, ivy bushes thick as a man.  
Around it, tame swine lie down, goats, pigs, wild swine, grazing deer, a badger’s brood.’

7 Esther De Waal, *A World Made Whole* Fount, London 1991, pp 10, 14.

8 Simpson, *Exploring Celtic Spirituality*, p 86.

9 Ian Bradley, *The Celtic Way* Darton, Longman and Todd, London 1993, p 52.

10 As found and discussed in Mary Low ‘The natural world in early Irish Christianity’ in Mark Atherton (ed.), *Celts and Christians: New Approaches to the Religious Traditions of Britain and Ireland* University of Wales Press, Cardiff: 2002, p 190.

The poem supplies an enchanting set of images, which in their entirety contrast the hermit's life with that of the court of his half-brother, King Guarire. According to Low's analysis the poem names twenty-two plants, fourteen species of wild birds and mammals, fish and insects. Bradley's adjective 'exuberant' is clearly well chosen.

### The link between humanity and creation

My second theme is illustrated in the early lives of the Celtic saints which are full of stories indicating their attachment and closeness to the natural world. Michael Mitton writes: 'The Celtic love for creation included the animal world. ... There are many stories of Celtic saints showing love and concern for animals and birds'.<sup>11</sup> The following examples, drawn from Scotland, Ireland and England must stand for the many stories of this kind. Ian Bradley referred in his first book to the following story of Columba and his concern for a heron:

'Two days from the one dawning, you should go to the west side of the island and sit up above the shore keeping watch. After the ninth hour a guest will arrive from the north of Ireland, a heron, buffeted by the wind on its long flight, tired and wary. Its strength will be almost gone and it will fall on the shore in front of you. Take care how you lift it up, having pity for it, and carry it to the nearby house. Look after it and feed it there as a guest for three days and nights.'<sup>12</sup>

In the same place Bradley also draws on '[a]nother lovely story' reputedly from the life of St Kevin of Glendalough, who had gone to his hermitage to pray for the 40 days of Lent. The hermitage was so small that in order to pray in cross-vigil he had to place one arm out of the window. One day a blackbird laid her eggs in the palm of his hand: 'so moved was the saint that in all patience and gentleness he remained, neither closing nor withdrawing his hand' until the chicks had hatched. This miracle is at the expense of the saint, who makes a real sacrifice for the sake of the bird.<sup>13</sup>

Cuthbert, the premier saint of northern England, has many nature miracles and stories associated with him. Among the best known are the occasions in which his feet were dried by otters after he had been praying in the sea all night<sup>14</sup> and the provision by an eagle of a fish for him and a boy to eat. When the boy brought the whole fish that the eagle had dropped Cuthbert is said to have exclaimed: 'Did you not give the servant its share? Cut it in two, quickly now, and give half to the bird.'<sup>15</sup> The closeness of Cuthbert to the natural order is emphasised, and his concern for animals alongside humanity made clear.

A different example demonstrates the way in which this linkage between humanity and creation has been used in contemporary worship. It is found in a morning liturgy from the Iona community's *A Wee Worship Book*; it draws on

11 Mitton, *Woven Cord*, p 56.

12 Adomnan of Iona, *Life of St Columba*, trans. Richard Sharpe Penguin Books, Harmondsworth 1991, Book I Chapter 48, p 150.

13 Both stories recalled in Bradley, *Celtic Way*, p 55.

14 Bede, 'Life of Cuthbert' in *The Age of Bede*, trans. J. F. Webb and D. H. Farmer Penguin Books, Harmondsworth 1983, Chapter 10, pp 57-58.

15 Bede, 'Life of Cuthbert', Chapter 12, pp 60-61.

fragments of prayers from the Highlands collected in the *Carmina Gaedelica*. It includes a creed which is entirely about God the Creator:

All: We believe,  
O Lord and God of all people,  
that you are the creator  
of the high heavens,  
that you are the creator  
of the skies above,  
that you are the creator  
of the oceans below.

Leader: We believe, O Lord and God of all people,  
that you are the one who created our souls  
and set their course,  
that you are the one who created our bodies  
from dust and from ashes,  
that you gave to our bodies their breath  
and to our souls their possession.<sup>16</sup>

Focussing on God as Creator and ignoring or downplaying God as Redeemer is not untypical of modern liturgies which are said to be Celtic in inspiration. Such liturgies tend to draw more explicitly on Old Testament imagery about God as Creator (e.g. Genesis 1:1, 2:7; Job 38-41; Psalm 148 are helpfully echoed), but they also tend to ignore the Christological emphasis in creation that is found in the New Testament (e.g. John 1:1-3, 10; Colossians 1:15-17; Hebrews 1:2).

### **A positive view of human nature**

Many writers draw a logical conclusion from these themes of the goodness of creation and the link between humanity and creation by developing a third theme of a positive view of human nature. A popular approach is to contrast Augustinian orthodoxy about original sin, with the more optimistic view of Pelagius, a British theologian. An Internet search for Pelagius provides thousands of references, many of which are favourable to his views and hostile to what they see as the abhorrent teaching of Augustine on original sin and predestination. Pelagius is often characterised in such accounts as a Celtic Christian and even as a Druid, which is certainly anachronistic.

Bradley in his first book was far more circumspect when he wrote:

'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 the one who was sent not so much to rescue the world from the consequences of the fall as to complete and perfect it.'<sup>17</sup>

He went on to describe this as Pelagianism and also referred to the other great Celtic theologian John Scotus Erigena. Both of them, he suggested in that book, were probably more orthodox than their subsequent press has implied. Bradley saw the roots of this doctrine firstly in Eastern Christianity, with its focus on divinisation,

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16 Wild Goose Worship Group, *A Wee Worship Book* Wild Goose Publications, Glasgow 1999, pp 32-33.

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17 Bradley, *Celtic Way*, p 52.

secondly as a carry over from pagan beliefs, and thirdly perhaps in the Celts experience of being on the margins. In his chapter 'The Goodness of Nature' he devoted a considerable section to discussing the ideas of Pelagius and Erigena, exploring their views on humanity and their valuing of creation.<sup>18</sup>

Matthew Fox, the American author of *Original Blessing*, has long been an outspoken and radical advocate of creation-centred spirituality, and he was determined to play down the doctrine of original sin. He saw the Celtic church as an obvious forerunner of his own theology; and in a rather strange family tree in which he grades various creation-centred spiritualities Fox gave Scotus Erigena three stars, saying 'He represents the Celtic love of God in nature and nature in God'<sup>19</sup>

Taking this cluster of Creation themes together, there is no doubt that much current thinking about Celtic Christianity sees it as creation-centred, and that that is wholly to be welcomed. How accurate this is as an historical judgement we will come to after my second cluster.

## Valuing the feminine

It is commonplace for writers about Celtic society in general and Celtic Christianity in particular to emphasize its openness to women and to the feminine. I shall briefly mention the two themes of leadership and embodied spirituality in this cluster, though others such as sexuality, motherhood and family life could be included.

### Leadership

For some writers the leadership role model of women in the supposed Celtic church is of great significance. This is particularly true of two Church of England ministers long associated with the promotion of Charismatic Renewal, and now with strong links to Holy Island (Lindisfarne). Michael Mitton reflected on the positive place of women in Celtic society by contrasting it with other societies, 'the woman very much retained her identity, and there was no sense of the husband owning her or her belongings.'<sup>20</sup> He went on: 'It was therefore inevitable that the emerging Christian church would take this positive attitude to women into their community life. Thus there was no problem in women like Brigid, Hilda, Ebba, Ethelburga and others exercising leadership roles in their communities.'<sup>21</sup> Despite heading his chapter on women's ministry as being about Brigid his main example is of Hilda of Whitby 'who is a much-loved Celtic saint in England'<sup>22</sup>.

Ray Simpson follows a similar pattern in highlighting the example of Hilda alongside that of Brigid. (This is not surprising since Mitton and Simpson are among the founders of the dispersed Community of Aidan and Hilda.) Simpson prefaces his quotations from Bede's description of Hilda by stating: 'Some of the Celts' most notable women leaders displayed a wholesome balance of feminine and masculine qualities.'<sup>23</sup> Drawing on Bede, Simpson seems to regard Hilda's devotion, grace and innate wisdom as feminine and maternal qualities and her teaching ministry as a masculine quality, though why is not stated.

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18 Bradley, *Celtic Way*, pp 62-69.

19 Matthew Fox, *Original Blessing* Bear & Company, Santa Fe 1983, p 308.

20 Mitton, *Woven Cord*, p 113.

21 Mitton, *Woven Cord*, p 114.

22 Mitton, *Woven Cord*, p 115.

### Embodied spirituality

The second theme in the valuing of the feminine is one which is very important to contemporary writers. It is also linked to my first cluster of themes of being creation-centred, and may be described as embodied spirituality. Unlike the dominant Western theology, usually seen as stemming from Augustine, Celtic Christianity is said to be positive about the body and earthly matters, at least partly because it is open to the feminine.

Embodied spirituality is exemplified in such prayers as this traditional one for milking the cows:

Bless, O God, my little cow,  
 Bless, O God, my desire;  
 Bless thou my partnership  
 And the milking of my hands, O God.  
 Bless, O God, each teat,  
 Bless, O God, each finger;  
 Bless thou each drop  
 That goes into my pitcher, O God.<sup>24</sup>

It is seen in the perhaps unexpected story about Columba who was consulted by a man whose wife would not sleep with him. Columba quoted the saying of the Lord, "Two shall be in one flesh". When the woman refused to respond to his arguments Columba persuaded the couple to fast and pray with him, and he continued his prayers whilst they slept. In the morning the woman was quite changed, and 'the heart of the wife was fixed entirely on her husband's love, so that she never afterwards refused the dues of the marriage bed as she used to'.<sup>25</sup> Whatever one makes of the methods of persuasion employed the story is clearly based on a positive view of sexual love in marriage.

Both Mitton and Simpson make the claim in their books that the Celtic Christians had a healthy attitude to sexuality, and affirmed different though equally important male and female roles<sup>26</sup>. It is also a feature of worship material from the modern Celtic genre that sexuality is not ignored and that bodies are mentioned in realistic ways that do not occur very often in Church of England prayers, for example. In his bestselling liturgical book Ray Simpson included a number of such prayers for regular use. In *Morning Worship for Mondays and the Trinity season* the suggested intercessions begin:

'Lord, we give you thanks for the little trinities that reflect your nature to us:  
 For the tender kiss, the friendly hug,  
 For the man and wife who make love and conceive.  
 For the babe who sucks its mother's breasts.'<sup>27</sup>

23 Simpson, *Exploring Celtic Spirituality*, p 79.

24 Martin Wallace, *Pocket Celtic Prayers*  
 National Society/Church House Publishing,  
 London 1996, p 51.

25 Adomnan, *Life of St Columba*, Book II,  
 Chapter 41, p 195.

26 Mitton, *Woven Cord*, p 119; Simpson,  
*Exploring Celtic Spirituality*, pp 73-82,  
 especially p 80.

27 Simpson, *Celtic Worship*, p 10.



The widely used *A Wee Worship Book* from the Iona Community includes prayers exemplifying an embodied spirituality, as in this extract from a meditation which makes memorable use of hands:

'You gave us hands to hold:  
black hands and white hands,  
African hands and Asian hands,  
the clasping hands of lovers,  
and the reluctant hands of those  
Who don't believe they are worth holding.'<sup>28</sup>

Here then are two important clusters of themes: creation and valuing the feminine, which are picked up by many writers on Celtic Christianity, and which attract many contemporary Christians to feed on this tradition. I now offer a historical critique of the sources and the manner in which they are used. I believe we find examples of mis-reading texts by ignoring their historical contexts and selective quotation which leads to distortion.

## Spirituality of Creation

### The goodness of the creation

It would be perverse to deny the existence of poetry which celebrates creation or of artwork rich in creation motifs. A couple of such poems are included above, and we have only to mention the Book of Kells say, famous for its cat and other zoomorphic designs. The Lindisfarne Gospels have many animal and bird designs, including its own cat on the opening page of Luke's gospel, and birds which can be identified as living on Holy Island.

However, such designs are far from an exclusive Celtic inheritance: at the very least these designs owe much to Germanic designs, known by palaeographers as Salin Style II. The Anglo-Saxon illustrator of the Lindisfarne Gospels did also draw on Celtic influences, but it was far from exclusively so. In fact, the Germanic Salin Style II itself spread into so-called Celtic areas, making an impact on the Book of Durrow and the Book of Kells and on objects found in Pictland. Michelle Brown, Curator of Illuminated Manuscripts at the British Library has made the most recent detailed study of the Lindisfarne Gospels and concluded that the real genius of the Lindisfarne illustrator was to draw on Irish, Pictish, Northumbrian, Germanic and Mediterranean designs and make a harmonious whole.<sup>29</sup>

The nature poetry certainly celebrates biodiversity: the poem Marban's Hermitage mentions a wealth of plant and animal life. However, the character of these poems must be found by considering their context: the Irish scholar Donnchadh O'Corrain has examined the fourteen main nature poems and concluded that they are 'disconcertingly unrealistic' about monastic life. Rather, he believes,

'It belongs to a genre of literature in which the goods of the hermit life, far from stress and bustle and from the strains of communal living, are idealized and extolled by literary men whose own lives were lived out, as teachers and administrators, in the great monastic towns and the schools attached to them.'

28 *Wee Worship Book*, p 59.

29 Brown, *The Lindisfarne Gospels*, pp 395-6.

His conclusion on a series of poems about the hermit life is that they are not 'the ingenious product of the primary emotions and experiences of the hermit life' but 'sophisticated works of art ... of cultivated and scholarly men writing to meet the needs and taste of a cultural elite'.<sup>30</sup> The context of the poems' origin seems to be, not the first hand experience of sixth and seventh century hermits, but of ninth and tenth century town dwellers, nostalgic about their own past. Bradley, having at least partially repented of the enthusiasm of his earlier book *The Celtic Way*, here saw this as further evidence of the earliest strand of myth making about the Celtic Church, which began with Bede's account in *A History of the English Church and People*: that is, these nature poems are not evidence of the ecological heart of real hermits in the 'Celtic' period but the much later yearnings of those who felt they had lost touch with nature.

The claim that the Celts were somehow uniquely in touch with nature or had a special place for the goodness of creation because of this poetry or because of so-called Celtic designs is not sustained by the manuscript, literary and archaeological evidence. Most if not all pre-modern people were in contact with nature – there was no choice about it.

### **The link between humanity and creation**

There is no doubt that many stories are told of the 'Celtic' saints involving birds and animals. However, just as we do St Francis an injustice if we simply remember him as being nice to animals, so we can miss the significance of the nature stories in our sources if we too readily turn Columba and Cuthbert into proto-ecologists.

Take the example of Cuthbert and the otters: there was more to it than a man with furry animals according to his biographers. For the anonymous biographer, Cuthbert is seen as a Daniel, thrown into a lion's den, perhaps of the danger of lust; yet in the midst of danger Cuthbert, like Daniel, is ministered to by animals.<sup>31</sup> In his account Bede drew on the story of the Transfiguration of Jesus, quoting from Matthew 17:9: Bede portrays this as an awesome moment, which the man who had seen it was not to talk about whilst Cuthbert was alive.<sup>32</sup> Benedicta Ward helpfully makes the link here with Bede's commentary on the Transfiguration which is seen as the second epiphany of Christ paralleling that at his baptism. She writes that Bede wants us to recognise 'the face of Christ in a man so transfigured by prayer that the right order of creation was in him restored.'<sup>33</sup> This is more than a simple nature story, but a profound Biblical reflection about a man in a right relationship with God and therefore with all of creation, a new Adam showing what peace with nature might now mean.

The example of Kevin and the blackbird is more than a story about a man being kind to a bird. Given the context of the adoption of the shape of the Cross it is an important reminder that the real 'Celtic Christians' had the Cross and the redemption won by Christ at the heart of their spirituality. It is also a reminder of

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30 All cited in Bradley, *Celtic Christianity*, pp 33-4.

31 Bertram Colgrave (trans.), *Two Lives of Cuthbert* Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1985. 'Anonymous Life of Cuthbert' Book II, Chapter III, p 83.

32 Bede, 'Life of Cuthbert', Chapter 10.

33 Benedicta Ward, 'The Spirituality of St Cuthbert' in Gerald Bonner, David Rollason, Clare Stancliffe (eds), *St Cuthbert, His Cult and His Community: To AD 1200* Boydell Press, Woodbridge 1989, p 72.

the asceticism involved in many of their practices, some of which go far beyond what we today would consider psychologically healthy. Having acknowledged that, the specifics of the story do also challenge us to consider if we humans should sometimes make sacrifices for the sake of other species, and not only for other humans.<sup>34</sup>

The traditions about Columba present an ambiguous relationship with the natural world: besides the story of the heron, which is there to illustrate his prophetic gift, there is another in which an animal appears to be aided by the saint. A knife blessed by Columba is unable to kill a bullock, in fact despite great effort it would not pierce the skin.<sup>35</sup> Yet only three short chapters earlier we read this: 'This is enough about such stories about terrible vengeance on his opponents. Now we shall say a few things about animals.' That is, Columba was depicted as taking vengeance on both human and animals opponents:

'Once, when St Columba was staying for a few days in Skye, he took himself off on his own, no little distance from the brethren with him, in order to pray. Entering a dense forest, he encountered a boar of amazing size which was being pursued by hunting-dogs. Seeing this, the saint stood still and watched it from a distance. Then he raised his holy hand and called on the name of God with earnest prayer, and said to the boar: "Go no further, but die where you are now." The saint's voice rang out in the forest, and the beast was unable to move any further but at once collapsed dead in front of him, killed by the power of his terrible word.'<sup>36</sup>

The story might be said to illustrate a certain closeness and interaction with the natural world, but this is far removed from any sentimental interpretation of humanity's connection to the rest of the created order. As with the story about the knife and the bullock, the intent of the story is to emphasize the power and authority of Columba, in some ways paralleling the stories of Jesus' power over nature. Whilst the links between humanity and creation are real they are multi-faceted in content and layered in their interpretation. It is good to see Mitton and Simpson recognising that there are complex layers of meaning though there remains a sense of naïveté about some of their descriptions, for example when Mitton suggests that 'many Celtic communities were formed in wild and remote places, for it was here that they could feel the power of the wind and the strength of the sea.'<sup>37</sup>

## A positive view of human nature

There is more divergence amongst writers on Celtic Christianity when it comes to their views of human nature. It is noticeable that Simpson and Mitton, perhaps with their evangelical roots still showing, discuss the reality of sin and evil in the world, and do not major on a positive view of human nature; perhaps it is also relevant that they make more of the spiritual warfare theme than other writers.

Bradley initially emphasised this theme, as mentioned above, even if not as fully as some. 'The stress is not on cutting sinful humanity down to size but rather on

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34 This point is usefully discussed in Low, 'The natural world' in Atherton, *Celts and Christians*, pp 192-3.

35 Adomnan, *Life of St Columba*, Book II, Chapter 29, pp 177-8.

36 Adomnan, *Columba*, Book II, Chapter 26, p 175.

37 Mitton, *Woven Cord*, p 54.

liberating and encouraging people to fulfil their potential and achieve their destiny of communion with God.<sup>38</sup> However, in his last book Bradley makes no mention of this supposed Celtic or Pelagian understanding of human nature. Indeed, among the distinctive themes he still finds is both blessing and cursing. This time he writes: ‘It is misleading to think of Celtic Christians as “beautiful people” always full of sweetness and light who went around saying nice things about each other. ... Celtic saints were renowned for their propensity to curse as well as to bless.’<sup>39</sup> Bradley goes on to cite a recent study on Liturgical Cursing which finds that whilst it was not confined to Celtic Christians there is far more reference to cursing on the lives of Irish and Welsh saints than in other medieval lives. The Welsh David banished bees from one of his follower’s settlement, and withered the hand of a man about to strike him!

In another chapter which might be regarded as relevant to an understanding of human nature Bradley discusses the theme of penance and pastoral care. There is considerable debate over how systems of penance were established in Western Christianity, one likely view being that it came from Irish missionaries. Whether or not that is the case, the largest group of documents from this period of Celtic Christianity are penitentials, and they can make depressing reading. Punishments for a multitude of crimes might be seen as a quasi-Pelagian attempt to improve human nature, though calling it an optimistic view would then be odd.

Yet the penitentials also offer a system of pastoral care, based on confession and forgiveness, and fully in keeping with what became the orthodox Augustinian view of human nature. Many of the penances are, in our language, about restorative justice, not an attempt to earn salvation: the returning of an ox, or helping a neighbour whom you’ve injured and can not work for himself. The fully orthodox and Roman Bede certainly had no difficulty in citing the example of Cuthbert hearing people’s confessions and teaching them to do penance.<sup>40</sup>

In other words, we see here both variation between churches in different parts of the Celtic world, and also the adoption of practices from one ‘Celtic church’ (the Irish) by non-Celtic churches. Examining the historical evidence makes it impossible to draw hard and fast distinctions between Celtic and non-Celtic churches in this regard

## Valuing the feminine

I will be much briefer in assessing the way in which this cluster of themes is discussed, for there are similar points about the mis-use of texts, inattention to context, and inaccurate historical judgements to be made.

### Leadership

As I have already indicated the role of woman as leaders in the ‘Celtic Church’ is a major theme for many of our contemporary writers. However, I believe, not least on the evidence given by the writers, that the theme is considerably overstated, especially as a distinctively Celtic attribute. Yes, Brigid, or at least the Brigid in the

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38 Bradley, *Celtic Way*, p 62.

39 Bradley, *Colonies of Heaven*, p 75.

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40 Bede, *A History of the English Church and People*, trans. Leo Sherley-Price, Penguin Books, Harmondsworth 1968, Book 4, Chapter 27, p 260.

stories we have, was a leader, but she is often the only true Celt mentioned, accepting 'Celt' in its modern sense.

Hilda is the other woman leader frequently mentioned in the literature on 'Celtic Christianity'. Despite being regularly claimed as a Celt, she was not a Celt, but an Anglian princess of the house of Edwin, and indeed was baptised by the Roman missionary bishop Paulinus at York. It is true that Aidan encouraged her in her monastic vocation and leadership, but her leadership role owed at least as much to Anglo-Saxon sensibilities about the status of royal families as it did to gender. Other Anglo-Saxon royal women, such as Aebbe (Coldingham) and Aelfflaed (Whitby after Hilda) also became leaders of monasteries, but this practice was not derived from Irish sources. Its origins lie far more in the dynastic concerns of Anglo-Saxon royal families to protect their investment in monastic houses and property, than in any supposed equality of men and women derived from 'Celtic society'.<sup>41</sup>

Similarly, the related practice of double monasteries for men and for women, which was found in seventh century Kent, East Anglia and Northumbria, seems to come not from Ireland nor from Rome, but from Gaul. Blair refers to 'the early to mid seventh century fashion' for double monasteries in Gaul, especially in the Seine valley.<sup>42</sup> Hilda herself had been travelling to a house of this group, Chelles east of Paris, following her widowed sister when called back to Northumbria by Aidan.<sup>43</sup>

### Embodied spirituality

I mentioned that both Simpson and Mitton believe that the Celts had a healthy and whole attitude to sexuality. The main evidence they provide is that some well known men and women of the period had positive relationships. Certainly the later (twelfth century) idea that Cuthbert was a misogynist is misplaced, given his work for women recorded in his life. However, the relationships discussed by our authors are once again of men and women of royal or noble status, who were familiar with working together and these examples do not shed light on how men and women related more widely. It is also possible to find similar close spiritual relationships in very different circumstances, such as Francis and Clare, Benedict and his sister Scholastica, or even Jerome and Paula.

On the idea that embodied spirituality is found in the recorded prayers we may agree there is some evidence that the spirituality was connected to everyday life, remembering also that many prayers quoted in Celtic anthologies come from the nineteenth century collection *Carmina Gaedelica*. However, it is not clear that this is a feature of 'Celtic Christianity', but rather that they are prayers of the common people, drawing on Biblical concepts.

In brief, once again the history does not support our contemporary myth that the Celtic church was especially feminine friendly: there is little evidence that it

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41 The thorough historical study by John Blair needs to be consulted for this and the following paragraph. See John Blair, *The Church in Anglo-Saxon Society* Oxford University Press, Oxford 2005, especially pp 81-2, 85 and 230.

42 Blair, *Church in Anglo-Saxon Society*, p 42. His care about dates and geography is both

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typical of his work and also in marked contrast to much that passes for historical discussion of 'Celtic Christianity'.

43 Rollason, David, *Northumbria, 500-1100: Creation and Destruction of a Kingdom* Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2003, pp 135-6.

gave significant leadership roles to women, and that it was somehow different to other cultures of the same period. As for the supposed healthy attitude to sexuality, this is a claim without foundation in any evidence cited by our authors, and must be seen as fantasy or wishful thinking.

**Why are we telling these particular myths?**

My proposal is that we are using these myths as a way of trying to cope with the shifts in our contemporary culture, which often go under the label of modernity to post-modernity.

Here is a list of comparisons often made between modern and post-modern ways of being and doing. It draws on a number of varied sources and my own observations.

<b>Modern</b>	<b>Post-Modern</b>
<b>masculine</b>	feminine
<b>hierarchical</b>	networks
<b>static</b>	dynamic
<b>centralising</b>	fragmentation
<b>reductionist</b>	holistic
<b>bureaucratic</b>	free wheeling
<b>McDonaldization</b>	personalisation
<b>urban</b>	de-urbanising
<b>production</b>	consumption
<b>industrialisation</b>	information
<b>secularising</b>	new age
<b>religion</b>	spirituality
<b>medicine</b>	alternative healing
<b>agribusiness</b>	ecology
<b>word</b>	image

It can be compared with the following list which contrasts the terms Roman and Celtic; you may have made your own earlier. This list is compiled from having done this exercise with many groups in recent years.

<b>Roman</b>	Celtic
<b>masculine</b>	feminine
<b>institutional</b>	free spirit
<b>pompous</b>	simplicity
<b>cross centred</b>	creation centred
<b>redemption</b>	incarnation

<b>Roman</b>	Celtic
<b>human sin</b>	human goodness
<b>doctrine</b>	spirituality
<b>crisis conversion</b>	change as process
<b>word</b>	image
<b>hierarchical</b>	egalitarian
<b>static</b>	dynamic
<b>centralising</b>	on the edge
<b>diocesan</b>	monastic
<b>parochial</b>	missional

I suggest that a number of things are happening:

We are identifying, perhaps in an over-simple fashion, contemporary trends as a change from modernity to post-modernity. The recent empirical study of religion and spirituality in the town of Kendal, Cumbria has drawn on the concept of a 'subjective turn' in Western culture. The authors are referring to a move from life lived through objective, external roles, such as capable mother, self-made man, dutiful daughter, to 'subjective-life' in which the individual's own experiences, inner conscience, emotions and so on become a or even the source of meaning and authenticity.<sup>44</sup> They do not claim that all religious activity has responded to the 'subjective turn', but that the wider culture is now favourable to that way of living. It is in this context that the present growth of interest in 'Celtic Christianity' and 'Celtic spirituality' more widely can be located. Indeed, their study cites 'Celtic spirituality' as one of the 'more subjectivized forms of Christian spirituality'.<sup>45</sup>

Christians have a desire to cope with those change in ways that are Biblical and have historical connections to the Christian tradition. Rowan Williams has provided a helpful theological discussion on this desire, emphasising the importance of conversation in the Body of Christ across the ages, and the attempt to make sense of the messiness of continuity and change found in the history of the church. 'Good historical writing ... constructs that sense of who we are by a real engagement with the strangeness of the past ... The end product is a sense of who we now are that is subtle enough to encompass the things we don't fully understand.'<sup>46</sup> The desire to connect with our ancestors in the faith within these islands is thus regarded as laudable and even necessary; the call is for good engagement which takes seriously the frequent ambiguities and disruptions in the historical record.

Finally, I suggest that the 'Celtic Church' provides a vehicle for historical reconstruction and even imagination, precisely because there are hints of its suitability, but also because we know very little about it in detail. Simpson's attempt to explain which groups of people might resonate with Celtic Christianity today is

44 Paul Heelas and Linda Woodhead, *The Spiritual Revolution: Why Religion is Giving Way to Spirituality* Blackwell, Oxford 2004, pp 2-5.

45 Heelas and Woodhead, *Spiritual Revolution*, p 65.

46 Rowan Williams, *Why Study the Past? The Quest for the Historical Church* DLT, London 2005, pp 23-4.

so broad as to suggest that many see in it what they want: he lists those exploring cultural change, political thinkers, evangelists, charismatics, Protestants, Anglicans, leaders of House Churches and Roman Catholics.<sup>47</sup> The very diversity of this list says more about the wider cultural change already mentioned than it can do about Celtic Christianity.

As a result, the tag 'Celtic' is attracting what we tend to see as either the positive trends in our culture, or the ones which seem inevitable. By contrast, there is a tendency in the literature on 'Celtic Christianity' to ascribe negative trends or concepts to the supposed 'Roman Church'. This can be seen in the examples above in the spirituality of creation and the valuing of the feminine. A further example of this would be the rejection of institutional churches and other organisations in favour of relational networks.

My conclusion is not that we should abandon looking at our forebears in the faith on the grounds that some historical writing has taken short cuts, but rather that we should acknowledge the inevitability of re-telling our story and do so with more discerning methods. This means recognising that we are likely to be projecting back our concerns onto the historical record, and thus reading it in particular ways which suit our preoccupations, whether ecological or feminist, wanting a whole life spirituality or renewed models of mission.

I believe that our task is to be faithful to what we can know of the history, and to use it to inspire us to re-examine our interpretations of the Scriptures and the whole Christian tradition. We can best do that by being more aware of our own concerns and biases. Then there is much to gain from a three-way conversation between Scripture, our forebears in faith and our own context for the history and the stories may help us to reclaim aspects of our faith, present in the Scriptures, but lost sight of over the centuries. If telling ourselves myths from Celtic Christianity helps us re-evaluate the Scriptures for our own day then that is gain and we may enjoy the narratives and poetry of Celtic Christianity with out having to believe they are gospel truth!

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<sup>47</sup> Simpson, *Exploring Celtic Spirituality*, pp 15-20.



Celtic Christianity (also called Insular Christianity) refers to a distinct form of Christianity that developed in the British Isles during the fifth and sixth centuries among the Irish, Scottish, Welsh, Cornish, and Manx (Isle of Man) peoples. It is distinguished by unique indigenous traditions of liturgy, ritual, and art, which were different from other Roman Catholics during the period. The term "Celtic Christianity" may also be used to describe later Christian practice beyond the seventh century