

Celtic Spirituality: A Review Article

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'Celtic Christianity' has, as Philip Sheldrake has noted in the earlier article, something of an elastic quality about it. It can, among other things, refer to a particular period in church history or to an approach to Christian theology and praxis which has never really died out and can be witnessed in modern church movements. Again, it may refer to a fresh synthesis of 'celtic'-inspired ideas which are witnessed in various individuals and communities and the liturgies produced by them. 'Celtic spirituality' when it loses its Christian base can, of course, become a sort of Cave of Adullam for all sorts of strange new-age inspired practices.

A useful way in to the major players and ideas of Celtic Christianity is Robert van der Weyer's *Celtic Fire*¹. He draws upon the primary literature of the Celtic tradition (especially in the period prior to the twelfth century when the Celtic church is generally regarded as having died out). He introduces us to the testimonies and stories of Patrick, Brigit, Brendan, Colomba and others. He captures the testimonies of the Celtic saints as they reflected upon monasticism and asceticism (one of the elements of Celtic spirituality which is largely by-passed today). Many of the prayers of the ancient Celts are helpfully preserved in the book; capturing, as they do, something of the distinctive trinitarian and world-affirming flavour of Celtic spirituality.

Particularly striking is Ninian's Catechism (p. 96). Ninian argues that the fruit of the study of the Scriptures is 'to perceive the eternal Word of God reflected in every plant and insect, every bird and animal, and every man and woman'. Creation does not bear witness to God of itself (as the 'natural theology' of much 'celtic' spirituality seems to suggest). Rather, it is only the mind which is soaked in the revelation of God in the Scriptures that can remove the veil that otherwise hides the presence of God. True Celtic spirituality was radically biblical; an emphasis often underplayed in modern analyses.

During the latter part of the last century, Alexander Carmichael travelled the length and breadth of the Western Highlands recording the prayers that the oldest inhabitants had received from their parents and grandparents. Many are assumed to have considerable antiquity and are believed to tap into a stream of prayer that has its original source in Patrick and his fellow-saints. A modern edition of his *Carmina Gadelica* is available² as are several anthologies. Among these are George MacLean's *Praying with Celtic Christians*³ and Esther de Waal's *The Celtic Vision*⁴. The latter is more extensive and expensive. The former is a good

'starter'. Both tend to be 'sanitized' versions of Alexander's work. The original prayers often reflect the Catholic dogma that prevailed in Western Scotland and, in places, include examples of clear pagan syncretism. Little of this is evident in the anthologies. Nevertheless, for general usefulness (because they can be used and re-used) and as capturing something of the spirit of Celtic spirituality they are useful; the trinitarian, rhythmic and down-to-earth character of the devotion is particularly striking.

Various other collections are available, among them Anthony Duncan's *A Little Book of Celtic Prayer*⁵. This attractively produced volume draws its materials together to form a pattern of devotions for morning, mid-day, evening and night prayer and in a weekly cycle. The material is, again, largely drawn from *Carmina Gadelica*. Several selections from, for example, Ann Griffiths (the eighteenth century Welsh Calvinistic Methodist who probably knew little or nothing of the Celtic church) do, however, alert the reader to the fact that this collection is one that is willing to draw in those who sometimes wrote in a 'celtic' sort of way. This methodology is questionable. It tends to isolate certain 'themes' common to Christianity generally and then claim that they are essentially 'celtic'. It raises the question of what is or was characteristically 'celtic' and to what extent 'Celtic spirituality' is a figment of modern romanticism.

This selectivity also cuts the other way. Frequently, or so it appears, only certain elements in the teaching and the practice of the Celtic church are drawn upon. Few modern books suggest that the practice of praying in the sea for hours on end while holding the arms out in the form of a cross is to be adopted today! At the same time (especially in evangelically-inspired works) a naive acceptance of miracle stories is advanced as a basis for signs and wonders today. This betrays two methodological errors. While it is true that the modern church is often too rationalistic, the logical alternative to this is not uncritical supernaturalism which fails to note that the lives of the saints were often written according to a pattern of medieval hagiography which deliberately 'mirrored' the stories of saints in the Bible. More nuanced questions are not asked; for example, on what occasions did the 'credible' miracles take place? The miracle stories that seem to sustain the weight of historical and believing enquiry seem to have occurred especially in the context of face-to-face conflict with the powers of darkness.

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Two interesting books by evangelical authors fall foul at this point; the volumes by Ray Simpson (*Exploring Celtic Spirituality*⁶) and Michael Mitton (*Restoring the Woven Cord*⁷). They both contain some stimulating challenges to the contemporary church; especially in the early chapters of Simpson's book. But they leave the reader wondering whether the authors have not simply (and uncritically) found elements in the Celtic tradition upon which to hang their own theological shibboleths.

Robert van der Weyer's *A Celtic Resurrection*⁸ is a still more exaggerated version of this sort of approach. The book is a diary recording incidents in the lives of several congregations in East Anglia and the East Midlands. In different ways they find themselves drawn to manage their own pastoral affairs. To suggest that this was anything to do with the Celtic church, however, stretches credulity to breaking point. For centuries churches have been doing precisely this in Britain and most would have never have heard of the Celtic church. Moreover, it is a moot point whether the Celtic church was quite so decentralized anyway! The story is interesting and instructive but the title suggests an attempt to jump on the Celtic bandwagon.

More careful analysis is offered in Ian Bradley's *The Celtic Way*⁹. Several of the major characteristics of the Celtic church are isolated and discussed and the reader feels that here, at last, one is beginning to 'touch base' with the genuine article! The book is flawed by the adulatory way in which Pelagius is championed over against Augustine (a feature found elsewhere in 'celtic' writings); if Pelagius has been ill-treated hitherto (and there appears some evidence for this charge), Augustine scarcely deserves all the judgements which are piled up at his door. Overall, however, a good place to start in exploring Celtic Christianity.

One of the features of the authentic Celtic church was its emphasis both on place and pilgrimage. This theme is carefully developed in Philip Sheldrake's *Living between Worlds*¹⁰. The book is a model of careful historical analysis; we need more of them!

This stress upon journey and 'sacred' place has generated literature for the modern 'celtic' pilgrim. Van der Weyer's *Celtic Fire* includes some concluding material of this genre. More fully *Celtic Journeys* by Shirley Toulson¹¹ provides a valuable 'glove box' guide; eight tours of the north of England and Scotland which trace the lives and movements of some of the most famous Celtic saints. Follow in the footsteps of Ninian, Kentigern, Colomba and others while on holiday!

Mention ought to be made of a number of prayer and liturgy collections which seek to interact with Celtic spirituality and apply it to the devotional practices of the contemporary Christian. David Adam, the vicar of Lindisfarne, has a special gift in writing prayers in a celtic genre. His sales alone suggest that he has touched

a chord in the spiritual life of many a Christian! A new volume, *The Rhythm of Life*¹² contains simple Celtic-inspired liturgies for each day of the week and for morning, midday, evening and night prayer. Those seeking a more structured, simple and ordered devotional life will find much valuable and biblical inspiration here.

The Office Books of the Northumbria Community are also valuable and, in addition to following a similar daily pattern to that of Adam, offer a two-year cycle of suggested readings and daily meditations drawn widely from other Christian devotional writings. How authentic these volumes really are to the traditions of the Celtic church is, perhaps, a moot point. Many will, however, find that Celtic Daily Prayer¹³ and Celtic Night Prayer¹⁴ offer a rhythm for daily individual and corporate prayer which will invigorate a tired devotional life.

The same can be said for *An Earthful of Glory* by Philip Newell¹⁵, the former warden of Iona Abbey. He draws more widely than simply from the 'celtic' tradition but, once again, offers material which should provide refreshment for jaded devotional lives; especially those who enjoy a liturgical framework.

This over-view of recent literature cannot end without a reference to Paul Fahy's *Modern Celtic Spirituality*¹⁶. Fahy writes as a convinced evangelical with a deep respect for 'Celtish Christianity'. In particular, he draws attention to the deep veneration for the Bible, the pure love of Jesus, the passion for mission and the clear message of salvation that characterized the early saints. However, he is profoundly unhappy with 'modern Celtic spirituality' especially as found in certain modern Restorationist circles. He warns that this movement is characterized by a credulity in interacting with the sources as well as the drawing of confused and wrong conclusions. He shows how a spirituality is thus extrapolated which includes (among other things) a failure to respect biblical authority, a desire to re-work Trinitarian theology and an emphasis on power rather than the gospel. He also notes that it outworks in various faulty practices; legalistic superstition, an unhealthy emphasis on symbolism, inappropriate engagement with culture and authoritarianism. Finally, he concludes by outlining the spiritual dangers that lie in a movement nearer, in places, to the occult than biblical Christianity.

This booklet is sometimes over-stated and under-edited but it is well-documented and offers a 'prophetic' warning to sincere fellow-evangelicals whose faith has lost its roots in biblical authority and sufficiency. Lose this, and Fahy seems to warn, we are in danger of losing everything. Follow Celtish Christianity, but only in so far as it follows the Christ of Scripture.

Overall, the literature suggests that it is important to determine exactly what we mean by Celtic Christianity and not to confuse this with 'everything Celtic' (even

pagan). Equally, it is vital not to indulge in a new-age induced romanticism which, when not brought to the bar of Scripture, is virtually indistinguishable from any other form of 'new-age' movement. There are lessons to be learnt from the Celtic church since they do sometimes help us to recover elements of biblical faith and practice which have been effaced by our own traditions; some of the prayers are especially helpful. However, evangelicals do well to tread very carefully; especially in view of the naive credulity of some of their brothers and sisters. We should 'test all things'.

Footnotes

1. Robert Van der Weyer, *Celtic Fire* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1990). 138pp, £8.95, paperback, ISBN 0-232-51772-X

2. Alexander Carmichael, *Carmina Gadelica* (Edinburgh: Floris Books, 1992). 688pp, £13.99, paperback, ISBN 0-86315-520-0.

3. George McLean, *Praying with Celtic Christians* (London: Triangle/SPCK, 1996). 122pp, £4.99, paperback, ISBN 0-281-04978-5.

4. Esther de Waal, *The Celtic Vision* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1988). 263pp, £11.95, paperback, ISBN 0-232-51811-4.

5. Anthony Duncan, *A Little Book of Celtic Prayer* (London: Fount/Harper Collins, 1996). 142pp, £8.99, hardback, ISBN 0-551-03052-6.

6. Ray Simpson, *Exploring Celtic Spirituality*

(London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1995). 211pp, £7.99, paperback, ISBN 0-340-64203-3.

7. Michael Mitton, *Restoring the Woven Cord* (London: Dartman, Longman and Todd, 1995). 178pp, £7.95, paperback, ISBN 0-232-52101-8

8. Robert van der Weyer, *A Celtic Resurrection* (London: Fount/Harper Collins, 1996). 115pp, £6.99, paperback, ISBN 0-00-627984-8.

9. Ian Bradley, *The Celtic Way* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1993). 134pp, £8.95, paperback, ISBN 0-232-52001-1.

10. Philip Sheldrake, *Living Between Worlds* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1995). 114pp, £6.95, paperback, ISBN 0-232-52119-0.

11. Shirley Toulson, *Celtic Journeys* (London: Fount/Harper Collins, 1995). 149pp, £7.99, paperback, ISBN 0-00-627882-5.

12. David Adam, *The Rhythm of Life* (London: Triangle/SPCK, 1996). 129pp, £4.99, paperback, ISBN 0-281-04893-2.

13. Andy Raine & John Skinner, *Celtic Daily Prayer* (London: Marshall Pickering/Harper Collins, 1994). 451pp, £10.99, paperback, ISBN 0-555-02845-9.

14. Northumbria Community, *Celtic Night Prayer* (London: Marshall Pickering/Harper Collins, 1996). 338pp, £9.99, paperback, ISBN 0-551-02974-9.

15. Philip Newell, *An Earthful of Glory* (London: SPCK, 1996). 182pp, £10.99, paperback, ISBN 0-281-04833-9.

16. Paul Fahy, *Modern Celtic Spirituality* (Cambridge: St. Matthew, 1996). 42pp, £1.50, pamphlet, ISBN 0-9524672-8-3.

Creation in the New Testament: Overview and Implications

David Watts

The subject of biblical creation arouses mixed reactions, even amongst Christians. Sometimes it is overloaded with the passing scientific 'interpretations' of the day.

But it has an abiding importance for contemporary witness to Jesus Christ.

Are we created beings who exist because a personal supernatural intelligence brought about our existence for a purpose?

Or are we accidental products of some purposeless 'blind watchmaker' that cares nothing about us or what we do?

What does the Bible really teach?

What should we believe and understand?

'He was in the world, and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognise him'
[John 1:10]

If Jesus Christ is the answer, what is the problem?

With the rise in cultural diversity and pluralism, this question is increasingly posed in Christian mission. Currently, within western society, more and more people consciously operate *outside* and *apart from* a