Celtic Christianity: A Theological Perspective
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There has been much written about Celtic Christianity, but the vast majority of books and articles can be classified as "romantic" – reflecting what the writer would like to think about some ideal form of Christianity rather than the actual religious beliefs of the Celts. According to Ian Bradley, "... it is tempting to suggest that Celtic Christianity is less an actual phenomenon defined in historical and geographic terms than an artificial construct created out of wishful thinking, romantic nostalgia and the projection of all kinds of dreams about what should and might be" (Bradley 1999: vii)

A more informative approach to Celtic Christianity would be to examine the theological beliefs of the Celts that have had an impact upon the Christian religion. These beliefs fall into two groups: those that particularly support Christianity and are therefore considered orthodoxy, and those that oppose the officially held tenets and are therefore considered heresy.

Orthodoxy

Perhaps no other tenet of Christian orthodoxy more exemplifies the Celtic approach than that of the Holy Trinity – the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost (or, in more modern terms, the Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer). This has been an extremely important concept, for if the three were considered separate gods, then Christianity would no longer maintain the monotheism of its Hebrew basis. Yet, the concept was not easy to understand, and even after the Council of Nicaea established its orthodoxy in the Nicene Creed of 325, there was still much confusion about it.

This confusion was to a large part put to rest by a Gallic bishop named Hilary of Poitiers. In order to justify this rather esoteric doctrine, Hilary drew upon his Celtic Pagan upbringing. Roman gods were often given numerous attributes; so Apollo, for example, was a sun god as well as the god of the bow and the lyre. Yet, he was only one entity.

In the traditional Celtic approach, on the other hand, we find "triplism" – the triple realization of a god in three forms, each with its own attribute – or in the terminology of the early church, its own *persona* (literally a dramatic mask worn by an actor). Such a god was thus a single essence (actor) with three *personae* (masks) – a One in Three. The great Cosmic God was portrayed as a single entity with three faces or heads, each (in keeping with ancient Celtic belief) being the home of a soul – a Three in One.

Another traditional Pagan concept that strongly supported Christian orthodoxy was the death and resurrection of the demigod – the offspring of a god and a mortal woman. This concept was very popular in the eastern regions of the Roman Empire and beyond. Such belief systems as those involving Persephone, Tammuz, Adonis, and Osiris, were widespread and popular, and they had a great influence on the development of Christianity. Indeed, the birthday the very popular god Mithras, often associated with this group, was the 25th of December; and since all of these figures were subsumed under the general rubric of sun gods and officially classified by the Empire as *Sol Invictus* 'the Unconquered Sun' by such devotees as Constantine, the official day of worship became

Sunday.

In the western areas, however, the concept – though apparently popular – was not native, except among the Celts. In the Book of Leinster, the god Lugh – the traditional Celtic sun god Lugus, after whom are named such cities as Lyons and London – was the father of the demigod and hero Cú Chulainn. In a great struggle to save the Kingdom of Ulster, this hero died strapped to a stone in a manner somewhat reminiscent of the Crucifixion. Moreover, after his death, he appeared to his people, as did the Christ on the road to Emmaus. While the book certainly did incorporate some direct Christian influences from the monks copying it, such beliefs as the death and resurrection of Cú Chulainn can be taken as authentic not only because they would have been rather central to the Irish culture of the time, but they would also – if made up by a monk – be downright blasphemous.

Such concepts as the trinitarian nature of the god and the death and resurrection of the demigod help to explain why there was so little martyrdom in the Celtic areas. Of course, just how widespread martyrdom actually was for a religion not altogether unlike the other popular eastern mystery cults has recently been questioned by historians (especially in view of the rather formulaic nature of the martyrologies). Nonetheless, there was so much overlap that Druids became monks with no apparent threat to their core belief system.

Heresy

Of far more interest than orthodoxy is the issue of heresy. Heresy is technically an error of doctrine, and the belief in one or another heresy does not necessarily invoke the threat of being burned at the stake. In fact, many heresies tend to recur every few generations in seminaries, and it is by no means uncommon that yesterday's heresy becomes tomorrow's orthodoxy.

The major heresies of the Celts tend to be related in one way or another to a world view espoused by the early-fifth-century British or Irish scholar Pelagius. His views were by no means peculiar, but rather they were indicative of Celtic outlooks that were widespread in the British Isles and that indeed survive to this day. In theological circles, Pelagianism is often called the "English disease."

Here we should briefly digress to look at the population of the British Isles past and present. The DNA of an Upper Palaeolithic skeleton affectionately known as Cheddar Man (from Cheddar, England) was compared with that of a modern inhabitant of the same town to reveal a 6,000-year-old direct match (see Barham *et al.* 1999, Cavalli-Sforza 2000). This contradicted theories popular in the early twentieth century, according to which Britain was subject to periodic invasions and repopulation. The biological and archaeological evidence reveals that the population has remained by-and-large rather stable in spite of various ages of Mesolithic hunters, Neolithic farmers, megalith builders, Celts, Romans, Anglo-Saxons, and Normans, who were of more political consequence that ethnic or cultural.

This is important for our understanding of Celtic Christianity. The core beliefs of these people remained more or less constant no matter who was in charge. So if we hearken back to the introduction of Christianity to the Isles during the period of the Celts, we are dealing with belief systems, at least a large part of which persisted from an earlier age and survive today in the realm in which the rulers have imposed the English language. To maintain that Pelagianism is the "English disease," then, is to recognize that it is a continuation of ideas first set down in writing by Celts and

adhered to even today by descendants of these Celts. Thus, a close examination of ecclesiastical preferences, for example, will reveal that the most Celtic church today is the Church of England, with its horizontal episcopal organization, its ordination of women, and so forth.

Returning to the issue of Pelagianism, the main accusation leveled against Pelagius by such opponents as Augustine of Hippo and Jerome was that he believed that one could earn Grace through good works. As can be seen in Pelagius' own words in his Commentary on St Paul's Epistle to the Romans, however, this was nothing more than an *ad hominem* attack:

> 5 *So too, then, at the present time*. Therefore, just as all did not perish then, so too some are saved now. *A remnant has been saved according to the election of grace*. The election of grace is faith, just as works are the election of the law. Otherwise, what sort of election is it, where there is no difference in merits? 6 *but if by grace, then not by works*. In case they replied to him about those concerning whom the word comes to Elijah: 'They were righteous; why were these sinners elected?', he added that they too are saved freely, just as the Gentiles. *Otherwise, grace is no longer grace*. Because to bestow gratuitously is called 'grace'. (Pelagius 1998b: 125)

For the reform-minded Pelagius, we are responsible for our actions and for the consequences of our actions, and we are also capable of doing good and of doing evil. This is made clear in his Letter to Demetrias, the most clearly authentic letter of Pelagius:

> It was because God wished to bestow on the rational creature the gift of doing good of his own free will and the capacity to exercise free choice, by implanting in man the possibility of choosing either alternative, that he made it his peculiar right to be what he wanted to be, so that with his capacity for good and evil he could do either quite naturally and then bend his will in the other direction too. He could not claim to possess the good of his own volition, unless he were the kind of creature that could also have possessed evil. Our most excellent creator wished us to be able to do either but actually to do only one, that is, good, which he also commanded, giving us the capacity to do evil only so that we might do his will by exercising our own. That being so, this very capacity to do evil is also good – good, I say, because it makes the good better by making it voluntary and independent, not bound by necessity but free to decide for itself. We are certainly permitted to choose, oppose, approve, reject, and there is no ground for preferring the rational creature to the others except that, while all the others possess only the good derived from their own circumstances and necessity, it alone possesses the good of free will also. (Pelagius 1998a: 38)

The choice between doing good and doing evil was thus facilitated by an extremely heretical concept (for that time at least) of Free Will granted by God.

The on-going feud between the Celtic and Roman theologians reveals more differences in the belief systems. For one thing, the traditional Celtic view exemplified by the theology of Pelagius held that each individual was created good and innocent. In the heat of argument, this concept had to be countered by Augustine, who promptly composed the doctrine of Original Sin. Of course, this

doctrine never did appeal to the British nor to the Irish.

Indeed, the great Irish thinker John Scotus Eriugena carried the concept another step in his *De Praedestinatione* of 851. He had been called upon by the church to counter a heresy, and by all accounts, he did an excellent job; but he created another heresy in the process. In keeping with the traditional belief systems of the British Isles as espoused by Pelagius, John believed that creation was in fact good. Moreover, human beings were created good as well. It was John's position that since God created everything good and God will ultimately prevail, the goodness of all things – and the goodness of all people – will ultimately be restored by God.

This was a dangerous heresy, for it called into question the concept of eternal damnation. From simply a practical point of view, eternal damnation was absolutely necessary for the church to maintain control over the laity. After all, if one is punished for one's sins and then forgiven and allowed back into God's presence (like the Prodigal Son), then such ecclesiastical controls as excommunication lose at least a degree of their power.

Of course, if the goodness of God's creation is restored, then what is the point of adhering to the strictures of the Church in the first place? After all, if one has the ability and the responsibility to do good and if the goodness of the individual is ultimately restored, then what of a Pagan who does good and a Christian who fails to do good? For the church to maintain control, Paganism must be obliterated as evil in itself, and Christianity must be championed as the only good. Pelagius, on the other hand, had already addressed this problem in a rather heretical manner:

> Those who follow Christ often believe that only Christians are capable of doing good. They assert that Christianity has a monopoly of virtue. But this assertion is quite contrary to what we can observe. All of us have met pagans who are tolerant, temperate, chaste, generous and kind; and we have met pagans who reject the pleasures and hours of this world, choosing instead the way of simplicity and humility. In short we have met pagans who reflect the virtues of Christ himself. If only Christians were good, then God would not be good, because he would have denied the rest of humanity the freedom to choose goodness. The goodness we see in pagans is proof of the goodness of God. He has granted every person, regardless of race or religion, the freedom to choose good or evil. The advantage of being a Christian is that through the teaching of Jesus Christ we learn more fully the nature of goodness; and through his example, we are inspired to choose good. (Pelagius, 1998a)

Such a position might be seen by a British thinker even today as "fair." This notion of fairness, however, is quite peculiar to the British and Irish, and it was not shared by the Mediterranean church. This difference is seen perhaps nowhere else as starkly as in the theology of predestination. That predestination was a British belief early on is well known (compare Hardinge 1972: 61). But it was singled out as being somehow different from Mediterranean predestination.

The difference has to do with just what it is that is predestined. A piece of Pictish art evidently from a Pagan sarcophagus or cist at Meigle, Scotland rather clearly illustrates the belief system of

the British Isles (compare Griffen 2001). On it we see souls being conveyed to the otherworld while a monster – the Decapitating Beast – is snapping off the head of another deceased individual. In between is the Archer Guardian, who is concerned only with protecting the boundary of the otherworld from such beasts. The fortunate souls being elected for salvation contrast with the unfortunate soul of the Pict being decapitated – recalling that the soul resides in the head.

However, just as John Scotus Eriugena pointed out in a Christian context, the traditional Celtic belief was that even the soul of the individual left to the beast would be restored. Indeed, under Paganism, ritual headhunting was performed partly as a religious practice with the understanding that the soul would remain with the head *for a time*. At some time, probably once the head had decomposed, the soul would be free to pass over to the otherworld.

Thus, in the new Christian context, the individuals in the wagon are elected for immediate salvation. As for the unfortunate Pict under the Decapitating Beast, he as well would be saved in the ultimate restoration of nature, but he was not at this time one of the elect predestined for transport.

In orthodox Mediterranean Christianity, this heresy was answered by the concept of double predestination (or more precisely, double particular election – Halverson 1998). In this Roman belief, some people were predestined to salvation and the rest were predestined to perdition. In terms of ecclesiastical control, those predestined to salvation would certainly be members of the church; and the alternative was quite frankly unthinkable – eternal damnation with no hope of salvation.

The concept that one could be damned as reprobate even before birth naturally flew in the face of the concept of fairness integral to the culture of the British Isles. While today we tend to identify the emphasis on predestination with the Church of Scotland, we must bear in mind that it is not double, but only single particular election that is at issue. In fact, the Westminster Divines stated this with resounding clarity, as pointed out by Hetherington:

> . . . the Westminster Divines did not understand the meaning of the terms predestination and foreordination to be identical, and therefore never used these words as synonymous. By predestination they meant a positive decree determining to confer everlasting life ; and this they regarded as the basis of the whole doctrine of free grace, arising from nothing in man, but having for its divine origin the character and sovereignty of God. By foreordination, on the other hand, they meant a decree of order, or arrangement, determining that the guilty should be condemned to everlasting death; and this they regarded as the basis of judicial procedure, according to which God "ordains men to dishonor and wrath for their sin," and

having respect to man's own character and conduct. Let it be further remarked, that while, according to this view, the term predestination could never with propriety be applied to the lost, the term foreordination might be applied to the saved, since they also are the subjects, in one sense, of judicial procedure. Accordingly there is no instance in the Confession of Faith where the term predestination is applied to the lost, though there are several instances where the term foreordination, or a kindred term, is applied to the saved. And let this also be marked, that the term reprobation, which is so liable to be misunderstood and applied in an offensive sense to the doctrine of predestination, is not even once used in the Confession of Faith and the Larger and Shorter Catechisms. Later writers on that doctrine have indeed employed that word, as older writers had done, and had thereby furnished occasion to the opponents of the doctrine to misrepresent it; but the Westminster Divines cautiously avoided the use of an offensive term, carefully selected such words as were best fitted to convey their meaning, and in every instance used them with the most strict and definite precision. (Hetherington 1856: chapter 6)

Conclusion

So when we talk of Celtic Christianity from a theological perspective, we can indeed identify a system of beliefs that originate early on in Celtic and pre-Celtic religion and that continue to this day. While one can attach New Age and Noble Savage romanticism to some idealized Celtic Church, that is not really the Celtic Christianity espoused by the descendants of the Druids. It is in the theology of the Celtic Church (or Celtic Churches) that we see just what Celtic Christianity really was and indeed to some extent still is.

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