CELTIC SPIRITUALITY:
THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN CHRISTIAN AND PAGAN FAITHS

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There has been much recent capitalizing on the notion of “Celtic” by popular self-help writers. Much of this writing gives a negative connotation to the influence of Christianity on what is presented as “Celtic spirituality.” However, a disciplined study of the sources proves that this is an inaccurate assessment, especially since one of the main characteristics of Celtic Christianity is its integration of pre-Christian and Christian belief. Certain New Age and Wiccan/Shamanic doctrines argue that the pagan mythology in Ireland was destroyed with the arrival of Christianity. In doing so, they fail to acknowledge that Christians were responsible for preserving the oral culture of pagans by establishing a written record. Because Christian monks also influenced the pagan doctrines they wrote down, it becomes difficult to define one religion without the other. Pre-Christian Celtic spirituality loses a certain quality when Christian influence is omitted just as Christian Celt-icism cannot be defined without the presence of pagan notions. A distinction of Celtic Christianity was its accommodation with a tradition unlike its own, resulting in the amalgamation of two cultures. Therefore, neither culture can be eliminated or discredited without the loss of key elements from both spiritualities. New Age and Wiccan/Shamans that claim a Celtic background to their doctrines must therefore acknowledge the influence of Christianity in order to appreciate Celtic spirituality in its entirety.

Likewise, Christians who attempt to discredit pagan influences in the insular lands cannot do so without destroying a certain part of Celtic Christianity.

Some contemporary New Age and Wiccan/Shaman doctrines claim that the influence of Christianity has tainted the very ideals of pagan Celtic spirituality. Frank MacEowen, a shamanic teacher, condemns Christian influence by stating that certain Irish historical texts, such as The Battle of Mag Tuired, “bear the undeniable mark of Christian cosmologies that clash with the primal view;” however, in the introduction of his book MacEowen admits that the Celts embraced the Christian doctrine wholeheartedly which resulted in the cultivation of a “unique earth-honoring Celtic Chris-

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1 In this essay, when I use “pagan” from a Christian standpoint, it means a term “used mostly by Christians to refer pejoratively to non-monotheistic religions and their followers [...] But in time Christians began to employ paganus to refer first to those who continued practicing the old Greco-Roman religion and later to followers of any other non-monotheistic religion.” When the term “pagan” is used from a non-Christian standpoint, it means “popularly and incorrectly used [term for] folk or popular religions. The modern survival or invention, in the West, of some practices associated with nature or with European pre-Christian religions.” Both definitions can be found in An Introductory Dictionary of Theology and Religious Studies, pg. 998.

If the Celts accepted and even embraced Christianity it seems absurd to state that the influence of this foreign religion had a negative effect on pre-Christian culture. Today, the popular notion seems to be that anything pagan (non-Christian) is automatically anti-Christian; however, there is no evidence to suggest that such an ideal existed in Ireland or any of the other insular Celtic lands when Christianity arrived. In fact, there is evidence pointing to the exact opposite. Diana Leatham states that “Christianity did not checked [Celtic] arts. On the contrary, the revelation that God so loved the Celtic world that He had given His only begotten Son for its salvation brought that culture to its glorious culmination.”

Years later, it would be Irish Catholicism that would help the survival of Celtic culture and even revive it in its continental homeland of Europe. Loren Wilkinson brings up an interesting analysis when he points out that the “ardent neopagans find it difficult to acknowledge that the fullest flowering of Celtic culture was undoubtedly in Celtic Christianity.” Certainly there were people who resisted the arrival of Christianity to the Celtic lands, but the majority of insular Celts at the time embraced Christianity. This acceptance leads scholars such as Leatham and Wilkinson to agree that the spirituality of the Celts would lose value if separated from Christianity.

The importance of this connection between the two religions is shown from the written sources left behind from Celtic culture. Scholars of theology, history and even archaeology have discovered that the pre-Christian Celts preserved their culture, history and religion orally. Mary Low underlines this fact clearly in the introduction of her book:

It is important to understand that there are no pre-Christian Irish documents dealing with religion, or indeed any other subject. Before Christianity, the only form of writing was ogham script. Surviving examples are plentiful, but they rarely amount to more than a few words: usually people’s names. Even the sagas set in pre-Christian period and recounting the exploits of kings, heroes and deities, come to us from the pens of monks and scholars of the Christian period. Pre-Christian Irish mythology in its original form is gone forever.

This statement explicitly shows that the surviving written culture of the insular Celts was transcribed by Christian monks. Therefore, New Age and Wiccan/Shaman doctrines that claim a Celtic spirituality background cannot deny its Christian influence. Some writers like MacEowen admit that Christianity has indeed influenced the Celtic tradition, but they claim that this influence is negative and describes the pagan religions inaccurately. Ironically such a statement is made without the support of primary sources since none exist from the pre-Christian era. Making a statement that is not based on data and that uses mere assumptions is unscholarly.

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3 MacEowen, xvii.
and creates problems in both academic and non-specialist settings. Whether shamanic believers like MacEowen realize the error in their methodology is unclear but the suggestion is certainly there that this exclusion of Christian influence is deliberate because self-help writers have become aware that a spiritual book with the words “Celt” and “pagan” (meaning non-Christian) splashed across the pages holds promising grounds for profit.

Anti-Christian sentiments have become popular in contemporary times and somewhere along the line Celtic spirituality became linked with non-Christian fantasies. Soon afterwards pagan religions began to conflict with Christianity in spiritual self-help books. Gurus like MacEowen accuse Christianity of negatively influencing Celtic spirituality by stating that the Christians were “motivated by a desire to frighten people away from [pagan beliefs in order to] win converts;”8 however, theologians and historians recognize Christian influence as the integration or accommodation of the two cultures. Had Christianity truly desired to frighten people away from pre-Christian spirituality, it would have been more sensible to simply allow the religion and culture to die away. Instead:

Two streams of culture now ran happily side by side: the new monastic schools and the old native schools of law, science, literature and poetry. The abbots of the sixth century who, through their extraordinary standing in the country, became virtually its ministers of education, decided from the first that a combination of classical and Celtic schools of thought was henceforth to be the ideal.9

To further Leatham’s claim, Caitlin Matthews notes that “the transition between Celtic paganism and Celtic Christianity was surprisingly easy. So easy that... druidism and Christianity mutually upheld common concepts.”10 This idea of Christians and pagans coexisting peacefully in Ireland and other insular Celtic lands can be found in the written texts of these cultures.

An example of this integration can be seen in the text Lebor Gabála Érenn, an 11th century folkloric pseudo-history, which combines myth, legend, history and biblical historiography.11 W. J. Watson also shows us a reference to the Holy Spirit in a pagan Irish prayer transcribed by an Irish monk:

I invoke the seven daughters of the sea, [Treachain],
who fashion the threads of the sons of long life:
May three deaths be taken from me!
May three periods of age be granted to me!
Phantoms shall not harm me on my journey,
in flashing corset without hindrance!
My fame shall not perish!
Let old age come to me! death shall not
come to me till I am old!
May the grace of the Holy Spirit be upon me!12

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8 MacEowen, 4.
9 Leatham, 18-19.
11 Sara Terreault, “Celtic Christianity” (lecture, Concordia University, Montreal, QC, January 20, 2010).
Christian influence can also be seen in the Irish foundation myth, the sons of Mil, which states that they were survivors of the Great Flood through their descent from Noah. As Thomas Cahill points out, “The connection to Noah can only be the result of later monkish tinkering with the original material.” The monks did indeed influence pagan culture by applying a Christian filter to the recorded documents; however, pagan spirituality arguably influenced Christianity as well.

Hagiographies are a form of biographies that sometimes borrowed quite heavily from pagan sources for their Celtic Christian saints. The Brigit tradition provides an excellent example for the seamless integration of pagan and Christian traditions. Scholars of history have found many similar qualities with St Brigit and the pre-Christian Celtic goddess Brigid, as well as the Gallo-Roman-British Goddess, Brigantia. Oliver Davies points out that “The metaphors applied to Brigit in “Ultán’s Hymn,” such as “golden, radiant flame” leading the faithful to the “brilliant, dazzling sun,” indicate the interplay of pagan and Christian motifs that seems to occur throughout the Brigit tradition.” Perhaps one of the most remarkable facts about Brigit’s association to pre-Christian culture can be seen in The Irish Life of Brigit when we observe where she grew up: “The druid went to Munster, to Úaithne Tíre, to be precise. There the saint was fostered”. To place the childhood of a beloved Christian saint in the house of a pagan druid shows scholars the spirit of accommodation so evident in Celtic Christian doctrine. Not only was she raised in a non-Christian home, Brigit was also able to find comfort in “a white cow with red ears [that] was assigned to sustain her, and she was healed as a result.” The cow in Brigit’s hagiography explicitly refers to “the white hounds with red ears in the [pagan] story of Pwyll in the Mabinogion, where they are clearly linked with the Other World.” Brigit’s story contains many similarities to both pagan and Christian myths. This hagiography reiterates the close connection between the two religions in insular Celtic culture which both non-Christians and Christians fail to benefit from when they disregard either influence.

Some Christians today believe that there are problems with the meaning of Celtic Christianity because of its relationship with pagan spirituality. The argument presented normally questions how much of Celtic Christianity is a direct result of romantic nostalgia created by contemporary Celtic revivalists and how much actually belongs in the books of literature and history. As Wilkinson notes, “Many Christians [...] rigorously resist any influence from the Celtic tradition. This reaction ranges from guilt by association (‘If it’s Celtic it must be pagan’) to a more scholarly perception that what much of our contemporary spiritual questing finds in the Celtic is a mere projection of our own longings.” Some Christians today feel that any

15 Oliver Davies, Celtic Spirituality (New York: Paulist Press, 1999), 32.
16 Davies, 141.
17 Davies, 141.
18 Davies, 507.
tolerance to other religions reflects negatively on Christianity because it opens the door to other, bigger problems. Ian Bradley sums this sentiment up nicely when he points out that:

To some extent Celtic Christianity was incorporated into this ‘alternative’ agenda, with its syncretistic and panentheistic elements being stressed at the expense of its more orthodox Christian aspects. To its conservative and evangelical critics, the Celtic Christian revival seemed to have been hi-jacked by the New Age movement and neo-paganism [...] The identification in Celtic Christianity of elements usually found in pagan religion continues to be a marked feature of books appearing under the imprint of ‘New Age’ publishers like Element Books.

Ironically, Celtic Christianity has become too pagan for Christians of a more orthodox view and paganism has become too tainted with Christianity for New Age and Wiccan/Shaman thinkers. The unfortunate part is that most of these sentiments are based on false assumptions and a misunderstanding of the data.

New Age and Wiccan/Shamans feel that Celtic spirituality has become tainted with Christian influence while some Christians believe that their religion has been spoiled by the pagan doctrines of insular Celtic culture. What either side fails to see is that Celtic spirituality has evolved from the integration of two separate cultures; therefore, Celtic Christianity bears the mark of pagan influences while written pre-Christian doctrines are seen through a Christian filter. When Christianity and paganism are separated, there can no longer be a term called “Celtic spirituality.” A unique aspect of Celtic Christianity was its spirit of accommodation. Writers like MacEowen who attempt to discredit the influence of Christianity in pagan Celtic culture are doing so without attention and thought to the meaning of Celtic spirituality. By omitting either influence, we are left without the uniqueness of Celtic spirituality that was what originally drew us to this particular mysticism and culture in the first place.

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20 Ian Bradley, Celtic Christianity: Making Myths and Chasing Dreams (New York: St Martin’s Press, 1999), 202-203.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


