

Lord of Lark and Lightning

Reassessing Celtic Christianity's Ecological Emphases

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Abstract

A growing literature explores relationships between religion, ecology, and environmental stewardship. In Christian writings, Celtic Christianity has been proposed as exemplary for contemporary Christians seeking harmonious relationships among humanity, God, and nature. The accuracy of descriptions in this recent literature of ecological values perceived in Celtic Christianity requires critical evaluation against the evidence. This paper aims to investigate the key themes contemporary Christian writers identify as defining characteristics of early Celtic Christianity and evaluates these against primary sources of early Celtic literature. A careful reading of early Celtic literature reveals an ambiguous understanding of relationships between humanity, nature, and God.

Introduction

[1] Investigations of relationships between religion, ecology, and environmental stewardship have been emerging in both popular writing and academic scholarship in recent decades. Certainly within the Christian tradition flourishing literatures aim to integrate environmental ethics with Christian theology (for example Badke, Berry, Campolo, DeWitt, Harris, Wilkinson). This awakening of a Christian environmental ethic has paralleled more widespread environmental concerns in western culture. Some of this Christian literature focuses almost exclusively on biblical texts as adequate motivation for Christian environmental concern (Badke). Other studies wade through various Christian historical and theological traditions, pursuing streams of teaching on nature and the environment in diverse communities of Christian thought (DeWitt, McGrath, Bratton, Wilkinson).

[2] One Christian tradition scrutinized in this discussion has been early Celtic Christianity, forms of Christianity that emerged, primarily in Ireland, Scotland, and Wales, in the seventh to twelfth centuries. The exploration of this linkage between early Celtic Christians and environmentalism parallels a resurgence of interest in Celtic culture in general, and early Celtic Christianity in particular, that has developed since the late 1980's (O'Loughlin, Bradley, Meek). While much of this Celtic revival expresses a genuine quest for accurate understandings of early Celtic beliefs, practices, and experiences, some of the themes, ideas, and ideologies attributed to Celtic Christians may be more of an artificial construct than accurate historical interpretation (Bradley, Meek).

[3] As presented in recent Christian literature on environmental themes, early Celtic Christians are perceived to have had a particular symbiotic relationship with the natural world. In this discussion, Celtic Christians delighted in the environment as God's good creation. Celts responded with deep compassion and concern to protect and care for the natural environment. Early Celtic monks, in particular, are described as seeing the goodness of God revealed in

creation. Imbued with a vibrant ethic of environmental concern nurtured by their Christian spirituality, monks are understood to have lived in dynamic harmony with their physical environment, showing a deep, abiding love for and a passionate spirituality inspired by the natural world (Bamford and Marsh, Bratton, McGrath, Mitton, Simpson, Wilkinson). Some of the descriptions of early Celtic spirituality verge on the rhapsodic. Douglas Hyde writes:

Columbkille (St. Columba), like Ossian and the Pagan Irish, was enthusiastically alive to the beauty of Nature. If – apart from form – there is one distinguishing note more than another, peculiar to the literature of the ancient – and to some extent of the modern – Gael it is his fondness for Nature in its various aspects. He seems at times to have been perfectly intoxicated with the mere pleasures of sensations derived from scenery (148).

Robin Flower adds, “The poets of the old Irish time had always a keen and unaffected delight in the beauty of their country, its hills and rivers, lakes and forests, the cleared plains, and the vast surrounding sea” (50). “The Celtic Christians,” asserts Loren Wilkinson, “had a deep sense of the goodness of creation and the presence of God in it. . . . Creation, though splendid in its own vitality, is nevertheless always *creation*, perceived in relationship with the Creator. And this was not a distant, aloof Creator but Christ the Creator – and friend and comforter” (139). “As for nature,” muses Christopher Bamford, “. . . this is a sacramental universe, birds, beasts and natural phenomena being the signs of a supernatural grace . . . birds, beasts and angels blend in a continuous polyphony of creation” (1981: 175-76). Susan Power Bratton concludes, “The Celts took the best of their ethnic heritage as nature lovers and combined it with an adoration for the Savior from the East to produce a magnificent ‘wilderness literature,’ now too oft neglected” (182).

[4] The context for much of this discussion of early Celtic understandings of theology, nature, and humanity is a political agenda. Contemporary Christians, particularly those influenced by conservative evangelical theology, have been accused of being indifferent to environmental issues; instead evangelical Christians have focused on anthropocentric personal salvation issues (Stackhouse). Critics within the evangelical community have challenged Christians to explore broader understandings of their theology, including environmental implications (Campolo, McGrath, Pinnock, Wilkinson). Christian writers from other Christian traditions perceive that they, too, have also lost and must recover a doctrine of creation that affirms the natural world and human responsibility toward the environment (Hall, Moltmann). This literature aims to rebut theses suggesting Christianity has been a leading culprit in contemporary ecological crises (White), and that care for creation is not a worthwhile or necessary Christian emphasis.

[5] As noted above, several writers seeking to nurture a care for creation among contemporary Christians have cited early Celtic Christian society as exemplary of proper Christian ecological awareness and concern. The connections made between Celtic Christianity and environmental concerns dovetail neatly with a recent revival of many things “Celtic.” This contemporary revival in all aspects of Celtic culture and tradition is well documented by Ian Bradley:

Interest in and admiration for “Celtic” Christianity is booming. Books pour off the presses retelling the stories of fifth- and sixth-century British and Irish saints, providing anthologies of prayers in the Celtic tradition and offering a Celtic model of mission and church organizations. Tapes and compact discs of Celtic chant, miniature reproductions of Irish high standing crosses and prayer cards

decorated with the motifs found on ancient illuminated manuscripts fill the shelves of visitor centres and tourist outlets as well as religious bookstores. . . . The appeal seems to extend across the denominational spectrum, and well beyond the company of Christian believers. New agers, post-modernists, liberals, feminists, environmentalists, evangelicals and charismatics identify with Celtic Christianity and call for a recovery of its key principles today (vii).

These proponents of early Celtic Christianity as an accurate expression of biblical ecological concern include these assertions:

1. the Celts had a unique, finely tuned appreciation for nature;
2. the Celts saw the goodness of God revealed in nature; and
3. the Celts lived in harmony with nature.

Because of these perceived sensitivities, early Celtic Christians have been proposed as role models for contemporary Christians concerned about relationships between humanity, God, and nature (Bratton, Campolo, McGrath).

[6] This paper aims to evaluate the key themes contemporary Christian writers identify as defining characteristics of early Celtic Christianity and evaluates these against primary sources of early Celtic literature. I will attempt to show that the assertions above are made with little critical reflection upon the actual corpus of early Celtic literature, indifference to Celtic Studies literature, and superficial consideration of historical and geographical evidence. In fact, writers today may be promoting an artificial construct, developed from a selective reading of the literature and, perhaps, a romantic nostalgia and a wishful projection of how things were and ought to be today.

Celtic Appreciation for Nature

[7] Much early Celtic literature, both religious and secular, uses natural imagery. A deep sense of awareness of the natural environment infuses much Celtic writing. A cursory reading of Celtic literature does suggest that the early Celts were a people of field, forest, mountain, and seacoast who developed a deep affinity with their natural world. Surrounded by verdant, lush landscapes, expansive seascapes, and the vagaries of northern European weather, the Celts developed a dynamic appreciation for God's presence and providence in nature. Scholars cite the wealth of allusions to nature in early Celtic poetry and sacred biographies of the early saints as evidence for a uniquely Celtic understanding of the relationship between God, nature, and humanity (Bamford, Bamford and Marsh, Bratton, McGrath, Mitton, Simpson, Wilkinson). In contrast, Mediterranean cultures, in particular, were perceived to have been more urban and less attuned to creation. Even the monks who left the cities of the Middle East and North Africa for wilderness experiences are described as less environmentally aware and in spiritual harmony with their environment than their Celtic counterparts. The hypothesis is that these "desert" monks were in less environmentally stimulating contexts than the Celts. Thus they were less sensitive to and concerned about the natural world. For "desert Christians" the natural world was a place of evil, pain, and suffering that could not inspire the passionate spiritual symbiosis with nature that characterized the Celtic Christian tradition (Wilkinson).

[8] Susan Power Bratton, in a review of Celtic Christian literature, discusses this relationship between humanity, nature, and God in depth (182-216). Her contention is that Celtic Christians

explored this relationship more deeply than their contemporaries in other parts of the Christian community because “the early Celtic church – at a distance from the violent theological arguments engulfing the church fathers of the Mediterranean region – may not have wrestled as strenuously with questions concerning the person of God and the means of Salvation, as ecclesiastical bodies of the dying Roman empire” (210). Thus, she concludes, “The Celts emphasized the aspect of God most interesting to them, the Lord as wellspring of the universe” (210).

[9] “Theologically,” contends Alister McGrath, “Celtic Christianity stressed the importance of the world of nature as a means of knowing God” (34). He cites the *Deer’s Cry*, attributed to St. Patrick, as a fine example of a Celtic delight in the natural world as a means of knowing God and appreciating God’s glory:

I bind myself today
The power of heaven,
The light of the sun,
The brightness of the moon,
The splendour of fire,
The flashing of lightning,
The swiftness of wind,
The depth of sea,
The stability of earth,
The compactness of rocks (34).

McGrath contends that Celtic Christianity revered nature as divine revelation. Consequently early Celts honored and cherished the earth as a matter of fundamental religious principle.

[10] Certainly Celtic literature does speak much about the natural world, God, and humanity. But other early writers in other cultures used natural imagery much as the Celts did. While examples of nature literature may be less well known in other cultural contexts, they are, nonetheless, present. Augustine, not typically considered to be a theologian who connected the natural world with God and humanity, was intensely aware of the natural world around him. Not unlike Celtic writers, in his *Confessions* Augustine delighted in praising God as he observed creatures like lizards and spiders. The natural world is very present in Books XI through XIII of the *Confessions*, as Augustine explored nature as an allegory for religious experience. While in *Confessions* and Augustine’s other writings, such as his *Expositions on the Book of Psalms*, nature is treated allegorically in a manner quite different from the simple, natural delight expressed by many Celtic authors, a reverence and respect for the natural environment is still evident. It is worth noting that nature is treated allegorically in some Celtic writings, too, notably in John Scotus Erigena’s, *Homily on the Prologue to the Gospel of Saint John* (Bamford 2000). Hildegard of Bingen and Francis of Assisi, writing in subsequent centuries, display passionate concern for nature with no clear connections to Celtic Christianity. Both Hildegard and Francis express an affinity with the natural world as rich and stimulating as those of the Celtic monks.

[11] In England, early Christian writers such as Cynewulf and Aelfric of Eynsham included descriptions of the activities of early English saints, remarkably similar in their relationship with nature to those of their Celtic counterparts (Moorman). In experiences analogous to those faced by Celts, English saints traveled the countryside facing a variety of natural dangers, yet the power of God gave them mastery over the perils in the environment. Aelfric’s *Colloquy* reveals a

knowledge and understanding of nature as rich as that of his Celtic contemporaries. While the Celtic monks undoubtedly portray a rich appreciation for, and delightful interest in their natural world, their experience was not necessarily unique. Simkins argues that an environmental ethic even predates the Christian era, characterizing the relationship between ancient Israel and the natural world. Thus Celtic environmental understandings may have emerged from deeper religious traditions, such as Jewish theology and Greco-Roman worldviews, that would have inspired emerging Christian traditions to explore relationships with their world.

[12] Within contemporary Christian writing, the impression is sometimes given that all early Celtic literature is permeated by a keen identification and affinity with natural world. Much early Celtic literature, however, does not use natural imagery at all. Most secular literature of the early Celts (for example, the great hero sagas) contains surprisingly little natural imagery. And much religious writing is also devoid of natural descriptions. Only one of seven poems discussed by Clancy and Márkus, in their survey of the earliest literature from the pioneering monastery of Iona (certainly an environment influenced by natural landscapes of coastline and hill, vast seascapes, and both harsh and glorious weather), contains any natural imagery. In Gerard Murphy's comprehensive *Early Irish Lyrics*, while poems with natural referents are common, more common are pieces without natural imagery. Similarly, in comprehensive anthologies both old (Sigerson) and more recent (Lehmann, Davies), the majority of poems are not "nature" poems. The religious "nature" poetry of this era comprises a much smaller body of literature than typically assumed. Only fourteen poems, several only one quatrain long, compose the corpus of popularly cited nature poetry. Virtually all of these poems have unclear authorship and hazy historical contexts. While this in no way comprises the fundamental beauty of the poems, it does suggest caution for scholars attempting to extrapolate general attitudes toward God and the environment in the Celtic church from a small body of anonymous literature within the larger context of early Celtic writings.

[13] It is valid to suggest that Celtic monks did, on occasion, exhibit a profound sensitivity to and affinity for the natural world around them. However this was not a universal theme in their writings. Much of the literature contains no natural imagery. At least as common as a general fascination with the natural environment is a profound sense of specific geographic place. In early Celtic writing, a sacredness of place, in which specific geographic locations are imbued with spiritual meaning, is a foundational theme. Specific mountains, valleys, streams, points, and bays are saturated with historical, mythological, and spiritual meaning in much early Celtic literature, rather than the general natural environment, because they were associated with a particular sacred personage or event (Kealy, Ryan, Sheeran, Sheldrake).

[14] While Celtic Christians had an affinity for nature, a more thorough investigation of other early Christian traditions and communities would be helpful to appreciate the extent to which the Celtic church provided unique insights into general relationships between humanity, nature, and God, and ecological concerns. A more nuanced investigation of the spiritual and theological attributes early Celts associated with specific sites would also be fruitful, exploring the extent to which more general principles about their theology, experience, and environmental perspectives might be extrapolated.

Nature Reveals the Goodness of God

[15] Contemporary writers emphasize that Celtic Christians celebrated the natural environment as a good gift from God. Susan Power Bratton concludes that Celtic Christianity exhibited “extremely positive attitudes towards wild nature” (215). “Celtic Christians,” contends Loren Wilkinson, “had a deep sense of the goodness of creation and the presence of God in it” (139). “For Celtic Christianity,” Alister McGrath concurs, “nature was God’s gift to humanity, to be honored, revered, and celebrated” (32). As we have seen, some poetry of the early Celtic period certainly includes rich descriptions of rural locations and the natural environment. These poems often express straightforward depictions of natural beauty with no moralistic commentary or deep theological application. These early Celtic poets, on occasion, simply enjoyed the beauty of their natural environment for its own sake, or saw it as a simple gift of God’s grace. For instance, an often-cited poem, *Dúthracar, a Maic Dé bí*, begins:

I wish, O Son of the living God, eternal ancient King, for a hidden little hut in the wilderness that it might be my dwelling,

All-grey shallow water beside it, a clear pool to wash away sins through the grace of the Holy Spirit,

A beautiful wood close by, surrounding it on every side, for the nurture of many-voiced birds, for shelter to hide them,

A southern aspect for warmth, a little stream across its glebe, choice land of abundant bounty which would be good for every plant. . . . (Murphy: 29-31).

Another short poem, *Dom-farcaí fidbaide fáil*, does see some aspects of creation as God’s blessing:

A woodland hedge overlooks me, the blackbird sings to me, I may say over my lined booklet, the birds’ trill rings to me.

The clear cuckoo sings to me – a delight – in a grey cloak from the copse. The Lord is truly kind to me;

I write well in the forest (Ó Corráin: 257).

A third poem, a well-know quatrain, *Adram in Coimdid*, reads:

Let us adore the Lord, maker of wondrous works, great bright heaven with its angels, the white-waved sea on earth (Murphy: 5).

In the original languages, the artistry in terms of language and imagery is superb. Early Celtic literature, alive with alliteration, rhythmic meter, and internal and end-rhyme in the original languages of Gaelic and Latin, revels in the natural world. Of course these artistic elements are lost in English translation. Undoubtedly much of this literature does suggest that, at times, the Celts enjoyed nature as a simple gift of God, but stopped well short of deep spiritual allegory, or a clear theology of all of creation as God’s blessing.

[16] Wilkinson describes a typical contemporary assumption about the context for this literature:

Celtic Christianity was highly monastic, transplanting the practices instituted by St. Anthony in Egypt in a remarkably short time to the rainy verdure of the British Isles. But it was a gentler, more creation-embracing monasticism. Whereas in the

Christian monasticism of the desert a main impetus for withdrawal to the wilderness seems to have been avoidance of the city, the main impetus in Celtic monasticism seems to have been seeking a communion with God which was completely open to God's gifts in creation. The Celtic monks lived and meditated in rugged, wild places – such as the beehive-like stone structures off Skellig Michel, a rocky spire in the North Atlantic miles off the Irish coast. But even there creation was welcomed and loved. . . (Wilkinson: 140).

The suggestion that even on storm-swept rocky crags “creation was welcomed and loved” may, however, stretch the truth. While the three poems cited above do express idyllic relationships with nature, other Celtic literature broods more ambiguously about the natural world. Menacing, chaotic, and hostile, the natural world for other Celtic writers is the antithesis of godly order, providence, and blessing. In written records of the lives of the Celtic saints, one of the chief sources of information on Celtic Christian attitudes toward their natural environment, nature is typically foreboding, if not vicious. The point of the hagiographic writings is not to describe a relationship of mutual blessing between the saints and their environment, cultivating a unique affinity between the saints and nature in which all of creation was welcomed and loved. The natural environment frequently harbors mortal dangers, requiring the miraculous intervention of divine power. Therefore, sacred biographies emphasize that the transcendent power of God, revealed by the saints, masters the forces of chaotic, life-threatening nature. For instance, Adomnán of Iona records several incidents where Columba (c. 521-97), by God's power, overcomes a variety of beasts and potential natural disasters threatening human life. Similarly in Carolus Plummer's *Bethada naem nEreann, Lives of Irish Saints*, the purpose of many of the miracles the saints performed is to subdue dangerous aspects of nature so that people were not harmed. Rather than celebrating the goodness of the natural world, these incidents testify that God is sovereign over the chaos and evil inherent in nature.

[17] Within the larger body of literature of the early Celtic church, the dark side of nature comes through clearly. A Latin poem, *Noli Pater*, attributed to Columba, begins with a passionate plea for protection from a less pleasant aspect of the natural environment: “Father, do not allow thunder and lightning, lest we be shattered by its fear and its fire” (Clancy and Márkus: 85). The *Noli Pater* is a prayer asking God's protection against a meteorological calamity. Like the descriptions of nature that pervade the lives of the saints, here nature is not a benign benefactress, provided by a gracious God. Nature threatens menacingly; only the greater power of God can deliver the faithful. This poem, the only one from the early Iona monastic community with natural referents, pictures the natural world as belligerent, not benign.

[18] An eighth-century prayer, attributed to Brendán, echoes this sentiment:

Deliver me, almighty Lord God, from every danger of sea and land, and from waters and from the phantasms of all beasts and flying creatures and serpents. Defend me, O God, from fire, from lightning, from thunder, from hail, from snow, from rain, from wind, from dangers of the earth, from whirlwind, from earthquake, for all evils. . . (Clancy and Márkus: 90-91).

Similarly, a ninth-century hymn attributed to Sanctán reads: “May Christ save us from every bloody death, from fire, from raging sea . . . may the Lord each hour come to me against wind, against swift waters” (Clancy and Márkus: 90). In an anonymous ninth-century prayer, *Dia lim fri cach snim*, the author prays to God for protection from a host of human and natural perils,

including the plague, thunder and fire, and the bitterness of the winds (Lehmann: 33-34). Celtic Christians developed a rich spirituality that accommodated the violence of nature – even death – while trusting profoundly in divine providence (Santmire). This ambivalent attitude toward the natural world as both benevolent and hostile reflects broader Celtic traditions, without religious referents, that see good and evil, blessing and peril, in the natural world (Chaimbeul and Ostaig).

[19] Viewing this literature today – removed by many centuries in time, perhaps separated geographically in space, influenced by cultural changes, and certainly insulated from the dangers latent in the natural world by technological innovations – current writers may overlook the vulnerability of earlier generations to the dangers inherent in nature. In the twenty-first century, readers relate to the gentle, garden-type lyrics of the nature poems. But the terror-struck prayers of monks exposed to thunder and lightning storms on bare rocky islands set in icy, angry seas seem less relevant and meaningful. Thus modern-day writers emphasize the gentler aspects of Celtic spirituality and inevitably select only the placid literature.

[20] Also at issue is the political agenda of current writers. Christian authors, today, seek to use the early Celtic tradition as an example of how contemporary Christians ought to interact – harmoniously and responsibly – with their natural environment. Literature that emphasizes the chaotic wildness of nature does not support their thesis presenting Celtic Christians as early environmentalists. Therefore, Celtic Christianity is typically presented in romanticized terms with violent portrayals of nature neatly expunged. However, by editing out the harsher elements of nature in Celtic Christian writings, contemporary authors miss the deep and holistic faith of people who not only believe God gave them good gifts in their environment, but who also believe God’s power can and will save them from perils in the natural world. The Celts’ experience of God and nature is ambiguous and rich enough to encompass delight and fear, ecstasy and terror, the lark and lightning. To argue simply that they view nature as revealing the goodness of God, without also acknowledging that they view nature as a dark danger – even an evil – is to advance only one dimension of the Celts’ understanding of the relationships between God, nature, and themselves.

[21] The Celts express a rich, multidimensional religious faith. They interpret nature as God’s blessing and appreciate their natural environment, albeit sometimes as demonic threat. They celebrate God as creator of nature but also trust in him as lord over its terrors. They live as joyful observers and wise stewards of the natural world, and as mortals needing divine protection from the perils of their world.

Celts Lived in Harmony with Nature

[22] The description of Celtic Christianity in contemporary literature on religion and ecology typically paints a landscape in which monks lived in harmony with nature. In a world where bird and beast were perceived to befriend the Celtic saints, Bratton concludes that this profound compassion for nature and sensitivity to all living things “challenges us to think about our own relationship to wild nature in terms of Christian values” (216). Contemporary people may indeed need to evaluate their environmental ethics in light of their religious values (Badke, Berry, DeWitt, Hall, McGrath). However, the issue of whether Celtic monks displayed exceptional compassion and concern for the natural world warrants critical investigation.

[23] Several of the poems cited above, plus others that make up the corpus of early Celtic Christian literature, do quilt a beautiful tapestry of life in nature. A well-known poem, *A*

Marbáin, a díthruabaig, thirty-three quatrains long, is almost entirely a descriptive cornucopia of early Irish flora and fauna. The poem develops as a dialogue between Marbán, a hermit, and his half-brother, Guaire, king of Connacht. The poem deliberately contrasts the secular – and ultimately illusory – pleasures of the king’s urban court, and the religious – and more deeply satisfying – joys of a rural hermit’s lifestyle. Ultimately, King Guaire concedes, “I will give my great kingdom . . . to live with you, Marbán” (Murphy: 19). It is significant, however, that Marbán, the hermit, does not live in the wilderness. His is a rural existence, but not an isolated one in a remote location in symbiotic harmony with nature. His experience is one that includes a settled agrarian community complete with livestock (quatrains 16, 28), and the pleasures of civilized life, including beer and hazel mead (quatrains 21, 22). Marbán is not an ascetic hermit isolated from all vestiges of civilization! Thus, while the poem is a wonderful description of rural life, it is not really a description of life lived in spiritual symbiosis with natural wilderness.

[24] Similarly, in *Dúthracar, a Maic Dé bí*, whose beautiful opening stanzas were cited above, the author continues by describing his ideal home as a comfortable monastic settlement, with at least a dozen other monks, established gardens, livestock of various types, wells, and other well developed niceties. Again, although the poem begins with an exquisite description of nature, it is clearly not a passion for natural wilderness that excites the poet, but rather a delight in nature thoroughly tamed by human agricultural activities. The monk’s desires include “a lovely church decked with linen” (quatrain 8), and a “house to go to for tending the body” (quatrain 9). True, the agrarian lifestyle extolled in the poem may be more environmentally sensitive than an urban existence. However the poem does not present a picture of humanity living in a symbiotic relationship with the natural world as has been interpreted by contemporary writers.

[25] Since the early twentieth century, these early poems have been interpreted as “hermit poetry.” The authors of much of this literature were assumed to have been hermits, who, motivated by a desire for personal moral and spiritual renewal, lived spartan existences in harmony with the natural wilderness. Kathleen Hughes describes the typical experience of the hermits thought to be the source of these writings:

The hermit retreated to the woods, living under the forest trees, regarding the seasons’ advance, listening to the birds, and watching the wild beasts as they played or came to drink; or he built himself a hut at the lakeside, or within sight of the sea, perhaps on one of the many islands which surround the coast, where he might meditate and pray. A man might come to such a cell after a long period of training in the monastic schools, so that a scholar sophisticated in taste and subtle in expression might enjoy without interruption the beauty of his surroundings at a time when his imagination, stirred by religious emotion, was peculiarly sensitive. . . (185).

However several scholars of Celtic studies doubt the integrity of these poems as accurate expressions of lived experience. Much of this nature poetry may not, in fact, be the product of hermits living in the wilderness – or even rural agrarian society – at all. Rather, these poems may be idealized, utopian visions of rural living written by urban monks, dreaming about utopian lifestyles far from the pressures of their current responsibilities in the large monastic institutions that characterized early Celtic Christian settlements. Boyle and O’Dowd contend that early Celtic Christianity was highly urbanized and monastic. Within this context, a romanticized rural ideal emerged which has continued to the present as a significant theme in Irish literature. Latent

within early Celtic literature is a passionate craving for solitude, apparently resonating from a frustration with urban living (Knott and Murphy).

[26] Ó Corráin argues that much of this early literature, “belongs to a genre of literature in which the goods of the hermit life, far from the 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 in the schools attached to them” (261). Of the lovely lyric, *Dom-farcaí fidbaide fáil*, Ó Corráin flatly states, “The poem is not the work of an anchorite or a hermit who normally lived in the woods or in a hut in the wilderness . . . more that of a professional scholar on vacation, languidly noting in polished verse, first, his feeling of relaxed well-being and, second, the pleasant sensations of his unwonted surroundings that cause that feeling of well-being” (257). Such an interpretation does not deny the beauty of the poem as a lyrical expression of the poet’s experience – or even of his ability to appreciate natural beauty – but does call into question its utility as an expression of a profound affinity with nature that is supposed to be characteristic of early Celtic spirituality. It is significant that the poetry, in particular, of this period does not explore less pleasant aspects of living in the wilderness. Instead the experiences are all pleasant and utopian.

Cold and wet and hunger are not mentioned. What of the discomfort of a rain-sodden hut in an Irish wood in late November when, of all the fruits, only bitter crabs, haws, some damsons, extremely sour sloes (that sweeten a little with the frosts) and perhaps some stored hazel nuts are all that remain to sustain the anchorite? The long list of rural luxuries bears no mark of real year-round experience (Ó Corráin: 261).

[27] Other Celtic studies scholars concur. Clancy and Márkus argue that real hermits, living in damp stone or wooden cells, fasting in hot and cold weather to subdue the flesh, were not the authors of most of these poems. The *Noli Pater*, capturing some of the ambiguity we would expect from someone actually experiencing the challenges of existence in the natural world, may have been the genuine product of a hermit. But the rest of the poems, commonly assumed to be the work of hermits, they suggest, are more likely the romantic dreams of urban monks who longed to escape the frenetic pace and pressures of monastic life.

[28] The Celts may have lived in harmony with nature. Certainly a theme of passion and compassion for the natural environment is evident in the lives of many of the Celtic saints. Maedoc is described as feeding starving wolves. Other saints rescued animals being pursued by hunters. Birds often received great respect and protection from the saints. The nature poetry, even if it is idealized writings of urban monks, does express a remarkable awareness of and sensitivity to the natural world. However, separated as contemporary Christians are from Celtic culture by hundreds of years and technological innovations galore, writers must be wary of romanticizing the relationship of the monks with nature. There is no compelling evidence that Celtic monks were the first “environmentalists.” An appreciation for nature is evident. An eye for the detail and beauty of the natural world is apparent, seamlessly woven together with a respect for the dangers and threats of wild nature. But a deep theme of environmental stewardship is not well developed.

Conclusion

[29] University of St. Andrews theologian, Ian Badley, suggests, “In the context of the current revival, it is tempting to suggest that Celtic Christianity is less an actual phenomenon defined in historical and geographical 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” (vii). Donald Meek, Professor of Celtic at the University of Aberdeen, asserts that the contemporary Celtic revival represents a “designer spirituality” constructed to meet a range of contemporary needs. Badley’s and Meek’s observations about the selective and romanticized portrayals of Celtic Christians by contemporary authors appear to be valid. To a large extent recent writings praising Celtic life appear to reflect more of the political and theological beliefs of the authors than careful analyses of early Celtic culture and literature.

[30] It is true that early Celtic Christians did create a rich, if relatively scanty, literature that explores something of their understanding of the relationship between humanity, nature, and God. Significantly, this is not a universal theme in the religious writings of the time. The majority of the literature of the early Celtic church did not make use of natural referents. Yet some writings do use nature as a powerful image. But in this material, relationships between people, their environment, and God are highly ambiguous. At times, natural beauty and blessings are clearly seen as good gifts from God to be enjoyed and cherished. This theme certainly is clearly expressed in the fourteen poems most often cited in the discussion of early Celtic attitudes toward the environment. However, how accurately they portray the actual lived experiences and religious understandings of hermits who lived in the wilderness is dubious. If, in fact, they are the products of authors in established monastic communities, sketching utopian caricatures of rural life, the poems may be interpreted as idealized inklings of the minds of urbanized scholars rather than embodied theologies of wilderness-living hermits. At other times, however, nature is portrayed as malevolent – even evil – requiring divine intervention in order to preserve human health and life. This is a more nuanced perspective than contemporary scholars, seeking evidence for a harmonious relationship between Celtic Christians and their environment, usually choose to explore. In Celtic literature, there is a dark side to the weather: wind, thunder, lightning, and fire are real, life-threatening perils. There is danger on the sea as tempests rage. Creatures, both in water and on land, threaten human existence as well as bless people’s lives.

[31] A holistic reading of early Celtic literature suggests that the Celts understood the relationship between people, nature, and God in the ambiguous terms that define real, lived experience. Such a reading, in fact, provides a more realistic and useful approach for contemporary people concerned about the environment. The Celts offer a fine example of spiritual balance. They could, on the one hand, appreciate the blessings that God could provide for them through the natural world. They could celebrate in delight at the flight of a lark or the glint of sunlight on a calm sea. Such beauty could move them to worship the Creator – the King of the Sun, the Lord of the Stars – in awe and reverence. “They had a comfort and appreciation of their environment that we tend to lack, and their feeling of belonging seems to have been matched by an ability to give freely and receive joyfully” (Bratton: 216). On the other hand, the Celts could feel the awesome power of evil, revealed in the natural world through lightning, thunder, fire, sea, beasts, and disease. This experience of the dark side of nature led them to spiritual reflection, too. Experiencing the terror of nature’s fury moved them to worship and to nurture a faith in a God of power, whose strength was ultimately greater than that of monsters of the deep or lightning bolts from the skies.

The fear of nature . . . is surely a universal human experience – the fragility of the body in the face of cold, hunger, rain and heat . . . whose comfort and whose very life depends on the constant struggle of strength and wit against a natural world which bears only a partial resemblance to the Garden of Eden. In such an ambiguous world, to pray can only mean to bless the Creator for the beauty of the world, its fecundity and habitability. And to beg him for protection from its cruelty and danger (Clancy and Márkus: 93).

[32] Contemporary Christian writers do well to identify a strong theme of environmental interest among early Celtic Christians. But an accurate representation of early Celtic Christian culture needs to be nuanced enough to identify themes of divine revelation in nature and terror at the chaos within creation. In the lord of lark and lightning, the Celts found a God worthy of their worship, who spoke to their joys and fears, their celebrations and their sorrows, their dreams and their realities. A balance of passionate appreciation, love for nature, and reverence for God's supreme majesty emerges from a thorough reading of the early Celtic literature. In such a theology there is motivation for ecological concern for creation, but also a profound awe and wonder at the transcendent power of the creator.

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