



Celtic Christianity: An Introduction

Is there really such a thing as Celtic Christianity, and if there is, does it have anything to say to Christians in the twenty-first century?

Introduction

Walk into any big bookstore and you are likely to find a sizeable collection of books with “Celtic” in the title. They may be in the New Age, religion, poetry, or “occult” section, and chances are they are more about popular imagination than scholarly research.

It is easy to see why this field is of interest to so many people. The colorful landscapes of Ireland and Scotland beckon Americans who trace their ancestry there. People hope that there is a form of Christianity in our shared past that exhibits some things we see our contemporary faith community lacking. The literature of Celtic Christianity has a rich tradition of prayers to God in everyday life, of appreciation for the natural world in all its power and beauty, of saints whose lives and actions inspire devotion, of poetry that speaks truth. But the danger is to read our desires *into* Celtic Christianity rather than letting it speak for itself. How can we understand Celtic Christianity on its terms and find ways to apply it to our lives? To begin to ponder these questions, let’s first try to answer the question, “What is Celtic?”

What Is Celtic?

There are many ways to define what is and what is not Celtic. As you may know from trying to tell others about



yourself, identity is a tricky business, and this is particularly true of ethnic identity. We can begin by noting that *Celtic* is not a word that individuals would have used to describe *themselves* until the last couple hundred years. People would more likely have identified with their land or tribe—

“I’m Irish” or “I am of clan X.” *Celt* was a term used by others to name a group of people or tribes that go back about three thousand years. Greeks used the name *Keltoi* or *Galatae*, and Romans called them *Galli* (Gauls). This is similar to a prevalent understanding of Native American peoples. Most identify with their tribe or nation, but others tend to lump them under the name Indian or Native American.

One of the clearest ways to define Celtic is in terms of language. At the height of its use in the second century BCE, tribal peoples were speaking some form of Celtic language from Galatia in Asia Minor (modern-day Turkey) to the east, to the Hibernian peninsula (Spain and Portugal) to the west, and to the British Isles to the north.

Along with the family of Celtic languages, cultural similarities are evident in the documentary and archaeological evidence. A large collection of artifacts called a *horde* was found in Hallstatt, Austria. So, scholars use Hallstatt

IS IT PRONOUNCED “SELTIC” OR “KELTIC”?

In English, either pronunciation is acceptable, but most scholars use the hard *K* sound. This is because the word *Celtic* comes from the word *Keltoi*, which Greeks such as Plato and Aristotle used to describe these peoples as early as the fourth century BCE (before the common era).

to name Celtic culture in a wide region from 1200 to 500 BCE. The beautiful spiral and interlace artistic style of a group of objects found in La Tène, Switzerland, names the Celtic culture that flourished in the fifth to first centuries BCE and spread as far north as the Insular Celts of Britain and Ireland. Its influence can still be seen in Celtic art of much later periods, such as the beautiful illuminated manuscripts and high crosses of the eighth to eleventh centuries in the Common Era.

Because of either migration, conquest, or assimilation by other cultures, the tribal speakers of Celtic languages eventually disappeared from the vast stretches of Europe that they had occupied for a millennium. By the fall of the Roman Empire in the fifth century CE, the Celtic languages survived only in the far northwest of Europe, in Ireland, and parts of Britain. Speakers of modern Celtic languages primarily live on the northwestern boundaries of France, Ireland, and Britain, sometimes called the Celtic Fringe because it hangs on the ragged northwestern “edge” of Europe. Early on, these Celtic-speaking lands were influenced to greater and lesser degrees by the Roman Empire (for example, Ireland was never conquered, and much of what we call Wales had only Roman governance). This becomes significant as we look at Christianity in Celtic lands.

What Is Celtic Christianity?

If we understand *Celtic* as describing people who lived or live in lands where Celtic languages are spoken, then defining Celtic Christianity becomes a little easier. Of course, Celtic culture predates Christianity. Celtic Christianity, therefore, would be Christianity practiced in Celtic-speaking lands and cultures. Then the question becomes, Are there still “Celtic Christians”? Are they limited to speakers of Celtic languages? What about a Christian who lives in Ireland but who doesn’t speak Irish Gaelic? Or perhaps a fluent Welsh speaker is an evangelical Baptist who is more influenced by Billy Graham than any Celtic inheritance. What if someone does not speak a Celtic language but appreciates and practices themes that are evident in earlier Celtic Christian material? You can see how the waters get muddy very fast. So, *when* or *if* Celtic Christianity died is debated by scholars and enthusiasts alike.

Sometimes when people speak of Celtic Christianity they are focused on “the Age of the Saints” of Ireland,

Scotland, and Wales from the fourth to the seventh centuries CE. These great figures are often credited with spreading Christianity to the non-Roman part of the British Isles. They founded monastic communities and performed legendary feats of faith and power.

Those who focus on this period of influential saints point to the Synod of Whitby in 644 as a turning point for Celtic Christianity. The Synod was a gathering of church leaders from areas that were very influenced by the Roman Church as well as those from Celtic lands where monasteries and clergy had more autonomy.

The Synod of Whitby decided to date Easter according to the Roman method, and the distinctive haircut used by monks was changed in Celtic areas to the form favored by Rome. These sound like small issues, but it marked an increase in the authority of the Roman

MODERN CELTIC LANGUAGES

Four Celtic languages survive today: Welsh, Irish Gaelic (pronounced “gaylik”), Scottish Gaelic (pronounced “gahlik”), and Breton (spoken in Brittany). Cornish and Manx had become extinct but have been revived in Cornwall and the Isle of Man.



THE AGE OF THE SAINTS

Ninian establishes Whithorn (SW Scotland) ca. 398.

Patrick in Ireland ca. 435, dies March 17, 493.

Brigit (Bride) establishes Kildare in Ireland ca. 500.

Columba founds Iona 563.

Brendan makes a seven-year voyage ca. 570.

David founds Glastonbury in Cornwall (SW England)
ca. 580.

Aidan leaves Iona to found Lindisfarne (NE England)
ca. 635.

Church in Celtic religious communities. So, some scholars mark 644 as the beginning of the end of any Christianity that could be called distinctively Celtic. The coming of Vikings in the late eighth and early ninth centuries also brought changes. Their attacks on great Celtic monasteries such as Lindisfarne and Iona struck a death knell for the thriving centers of artistic, theological, and scholarly achievement. Even Ireland was not immune to the invaders, and the full flower of the golden age had withered by the twelfth century.¹

But as we look at the literature of the following centuries, there continue to be themes and emphases that are in keeping with the earlier material. In addition to saints' lives, there is much material from monastic communities (poetry and monastic rules) from the Middle Ages that show evidence of this distinctive stream of Christianity long after the Synod of Whitby. Even after the Protestant Reformation of the sixteenth century, there were remote parts of the Highlands and Islands of Scotland that had less clerical control than their Lowland counterparts. With fewer priests and ministers to enforce orthodoxy, folk traditions such as those recorded in the nineteenth-century collection *Carmina Gadelica* kept alive faith practices that reflect ancient themes.

Enculturation: Celtic "Flavor"

Whenever a religion comes to a community, it is shaped by that community's culture and traditions. Just as Judaism influenced early Christianity, it was also deeply affected by the Greek philosophical tradition and some Roman customs. As Christianity spread to Celtic lands, pre-Christian religious and political traditions shaped Christian faith and practice. This lived itself out in many ways. Drinking wells that used to be associated with local Celtic gods were now linked to saints. The pre-Christian Celtic Quarter Days marking the turning of the seasons became partly "baptized": November 1, *Samhain*, transitioned to All Hallows' Eve/All Saints Day; February 1, *Imbolg*, became St. Brigit's Day (even Brigit herself clearly takes on many of the characteristics of the pre-Christian goddess Brigid); May 1, *Beltane*, when the new "good fire" was rekindled, often coincided with Easter; and August 1, *Lughnasa*, is harder to trace to one Christian holiday but it seems to have ties to Candlemas and Michael traditions.

One of the distinctive aspects of Celtic Christianity is the way that this particular flavor, or enculturation, persisted longer than other indigenous forms of Christianity. As stated before, Ireland was never conquered by Rome, and much of what we now call Scotland was free of Roman control as well—not only political control but also religious. Eventually, the Roman Church, continental European monastic orders, and non-Celtic-speaking cultures had greater and greater influence.

So, the homogenizing effect of the one true church was greatly delayed and in some cases diminished by the freedom of Celtic lands to practice Christianity in their own way. The same gospel was lived out in particular ways. For example, despite the cultural imperialism of some nineteenth-century missionaries, Christianity in African nations still has distinctive aspects. One can argue that even relatively young countries like the United States also practice Christianity in their own enculturated ways.

WAS THERE A "CELTIC CHURCH"?

This term implies an overarching structure like the Catholic Church in Rome or contemporary denominations. This kind of unified hierarchy did not exist in Celtic lands in the early Christian period. First-millennium Christians in Ireland and other Celtic areas were more likely to see authority focused in the monasteries or clusters of monastic communities founded by the same person. For this reason, contemporary scholars prefer the descriptor "Celtic Christianity" to "the Celtic Church."

What we call Celtic Christianity is in many ways as diverse as anything called African Christianity or American Christianity, so we should beware of making sweeping statements about “the Celts.” There is, however, evidence in the writings of Celtic Christianity for the emphasis of particular themes. They are not unique to Celtic traditions, but their emphasis lives itself out in appealing ways. This may be one reason why things Celtic are so popular.

God’s Encircling Presence

The pervasive presence of God is a theme that surfaces in Celtic Christian literature from as early as the seventh century and can be seen clearly in nineteenth-century material as well. God’s presence everywhere and in all things has been called *omnipresence* and *immanence*. Immanence expresses God’s dwelling within and beyond all things but should not be understood as limiting God *to* things (pantheism). Only a God who is beyond our comprehension, transcendent, could be present with us and in us everywhere: immanent. So, immanence and transcendence are complementary, not contradictory.

The prayers of *Carmina Gadelica* (gathered in the nineteenth century from Scottish Gaelic-speaking farmers and crofters living in the Highlands and Islands of Scotland) show these believers praying to God during all kinds of work of the farm and home. There are prayers for milking, weaving, baking, kindling, sleeping, dressing, planting, and many other everyday activities. God is not confined to church, nor prayer to time set apart. From “A

Bed Blessing

I am lying down to-night as beseems
In the fellowship of Christ, son of the Virgin of ringlets.
In the fellowship of the gracious Father of glory,
In the fellowship of the Spirit of powerful aid.

I am lying down to-night with God,
And God to-night will lie down with me,
I will not lie down to-night with sin, nor shall
Sin nor sin’s shadow lie down with me.

I am lying down to-night with the Holy Spirit,
And the Holy Spirit this night will lie down with me,
I will lie down this night with the Three of my love,
And the Three of my love will lie down with me.

Prayer 34 from Volume 1 of Carmina Gadelica

Sleep Prayer,” images like “My soul on Thine own arm, O Christ, Thou the King of the City of Heaven . . .” show that even though God is seen as the transcendent King of the City of Heaven, there is the intimacy of an immanent God who cradles the believer. Power and gentleness are invoked at once.

So What?

What does all this mean for Christians in the twenty-first century? Several things can inform our discipleship. As we take seriously the need to look at the traditions of Celtic lands on their own terms, we can examine ways in which we may be blind to our own enculturation. Are there aspects of our faith that are deeply shaped by the culture and time in which we live? No doubt there are, and that is not necessarily a bad thing. Becoming more familiar with the lenses through which we see the world can enable greater clarity, honesty, as well as openness to others. “I don’t understand you” can become “How can I learn from you?” and “How can we be the Body of Christ?”

Second, the freshness of the particular emphases and literature of this tradition might breathe new life and bring new insights to our discipleship. Try praying during an ordinary activity. Consider how God can be close and powerful at the same time. There is much good literature available in translation. Don’t settle for someone else’s description of Celtic Christianity (even this one!). Explore the material yourself. There are many translations of texts on the World Wide Web. Two good sources to use: *Celtic Spirituality* published by Paulist Press has texts from a thousand years of Celtic Christianity. The first volume of prayers from *Carmina Gadelica* is available online for free at <http://www.smo.uhi.ac.uk/gaidhlig/corpus/Carmina/>, and all the prayers are published in a book from Lindisfarne Press.

May you find fresh perspectives that inform your faith journey in the authentic literature of Celtic Christianity!

About the Author

Laura S. Sugg is a minister in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) and adjunct faculty at Columbia Theological Seminary.

Endnote

1. Simon James, *Exploring the World of the Celts* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1993).