

ARTICLE REVIEW

CELTIC CHRISTIANITY: WHAT IS IT, AND WHEN WAS IT?

DONALD MEEK, UNIVERSITY OF EDINBURGH

Review of James P. Mackey (ed.), An Introduction to Celtic Christianity

(T. & T. Clark, Edinburgh, 1989; 440pp., £17.95; ISBN 0 567 09507 X)

Celtic matters are in fashion these days. At various levels of awareness, both physical and spiritual, a sense of Celticness or Celtic identity, real or imagined, is awakening. In the deepest Western (and neo-Eastern?) recesses of ethnic, cultural and religious consciousness (the 'in' word), a search for Celtic roots and origins is in progress, based apparently on the belief that 'to be Celtic is to be different' or 'to be Celtic is to be pure' or 'to be Celtic is to discover our true selves'. In a world which is producing all too many look-alike figures, divested of any distinctive features, the quest for Celticity is enjoying a new lease of life. Pilgrims on this new, but age-old, *peregrinatio* believe that, among the Celts, living on the periphery of human existence, the last sparks of true life-fire are to be found. When discovered and absorbed, these sparks, it is hoped, may yet impart a new glow to the jaded embers of modern, ersatz society.

This quest is particularly marked in the religious sphere. Celtic prayers and patterns of prayer are in vogue; pilgrimages to former Celtic monasteries and holy places (e.g. Iona) are attracting participants. In these expressions of religious devotion, in word or in stone, lies a new 'spirituality', or, some would say, the potential for the recovery of an old, unsullied spirituality, forged before the theologians and philosophers of the Middle Ages confused the minds of the faithful with unhelpful dogmas and complexities. This notional primordium is so potent that it embraces, for very different reasons, members of the Free Church of Scotland and the Roman Catholic Church. There are those in the Free Church of Scotland who would look to 'the old Celtic Church' as their *alma mater*, possessing the true gospel before medieval Romanist influence pervaded her purity; her monastic exponents are commended without reserve; in the words of a Free Church professor, they were 'fine Christian missionaries' (J.D. MacMillan, in M. Campbell, *Gleanings*

SCOTTISH BULLETIN OF EVANGELICAL THEOLOGY

of *Highland Harvest* (Tain, 1989), pp. 129–31). A similar perspective is found among Roman Catholics, who are inclined to see the 'Celtic Church' as a reservoir of gentle, clamourless, pre-Protestant orthodoxy. In the words of the editor of the present volume, such seekers find in 'Celtic Christianity' a rich well of inspiration, there to be utilised at that critical moment 'when years of feeding upon largely teutonic philosophy began at last to fail to refresh my spirit and was beginning to fail my Christian faith'.

For all such, there is a peculiar attractiveness in those purposeful saints of the early Celtic era, as they defy the authorities of their own day, establish their power bases and influence whole nations. Transferred across the centuries, they seem to become the role-models for those who seek fresh beginnings. Columba (appropriately re-mythologised) is, of course, central to the construction of the modern Iona Community. Yet not all Celtic saints had the social and political panache of Columba. World-weary pilgrims who prefer contemplation to rigorous travel and pushy politics will find their soul-friends in those quiet Celtic hermits who, launching their coracles on the shore of eternity, took to the *desertum* in the ocean in order to deepen their awareness of God. In looking to these men, their admirers appear to stand on the threshold of a New Age of the Celtic saints, offering many things to many people.

There is a very real danger that pilgrims on this rediscovered Celtic way will see in 'Celtic Christianity' a mirror-image of their own desires for a meaningful encounter with 'spirituality', with 'wholeness', with 'being'. But what in reality is this 'Celtic Christianity' which is so magnetic, and so all-embracing, in its pull? What are its historical and theological parameters? Does it have a central core which can be defined? And in what terms? If it existed, where and when? Does it still exist, and in what form? Has it changed across the centuries, but has it retained its core unaltered? All of these questions thrust themselves at the mind on the first approach to this solid collection of essays, entitled *An Introduction to Celtic Christianity*. Expectations are raised that one will find definitions and examples, and, ultimately, an understanding of that dynamism which has led to this continuing, and seemingly endless, rediscovery of Celtic treasures.

Perhaps the only section of this book which fulfils the 'introductory' note of the title is Professor Mackey's stimulating 'Introduction', subtitled 'Is There a Celtic Christianity?' Professor Mackey is in no doubt that there is, or that there may be; the difficulty lies in rescuing the Celts and their Christianity from the preconceptions of other historians and theologians, who have perceived them as barbarians or have belittled their achievements, and persist in beating the Celts with Graeco-Roman swords. The point is

CELTIC CHRISTIANITY: WHAT IS IT AND WHEN WAS IT?

well made. But what are the objective tests that can be applied as we seek to identify this truly Celtic Christianity? How have those who are already giving the Celts a 'new deal' come to appreciate their real glories? Is there not a danger, present in all historical quests, that we find what we look for? At this point Professor Mackey leans hard on his personal experience, and seeks the definitions within himself: 'I use no other criterion than that of reverberation – whatever seems to reverberate within some depths of my own Celtic consciousness, as that too has been formed by my learning and use from my earliest childhood of the Irish language – that repository of a total and ancient culture...' Here the problem is that 'consciousness' and 'reverberations' are all too variable, and subjectivism, even romanticism, is inclined to take over. The 'Introduction' is thus impressionistic, conveying the editor's personal view, and attempting to fit the subsequent essays into this framework.

In opening up the subject in this way, Professor Mackey does make it very clear that his book has a wholly exploratory, or questing, aim. He does not provide in any sense an introductory volume which sketches the history of 'Celtic Christianity' from its beginnings through to its vanishing point – if indeed, from his perspective, it has vanished. Rather, he presents a series of snap-shots of Christianity, in different forms, and at very different periods, in lands which we now perceive to be (or to have been), to varying degrees, Celtic (Ireland, Wales and Scotland). He begins with St Patrick (a good place to start!), and ends (chronologically) in the twentieth century with Seán O Ríordáin and James Joyce (a mind-blowing 'conclusion'!). From these essays, by different authors, he seeks to establish very tentatively some guiding lights to direct us in our voyage round the Celtic spiritual landscape. Celtic Christianity, in his view, is characterised by: (1) 'the nearness of the spirit world' (as argued in Noel O'Donoghue's eloquent essay on 'St Patrick's Breastplate'); (2) the absolute reality, and interpenetration, of the spiritual world and the natural world (the latter being 'altogether good and salvific' for 'the Celtic mentality'); (3) the immanence of God, in a creation which has no 'original sin' (since this is seen as the invention of 'that dark North African, Augustine'), with the possibility of a 'characteristically Celtic theology of nature, sin and redemption'; and (4) the Celts' 'inherent ability to assimilate and to enrich whatever the peoples they encountered had to offer', in short their 'ability to adapt'.

Some of Professor Mackey's definitions of the Celtic core, thus perceived in the body of the book, may not be uniquely distinctive of 'Celtic spirituality', since the Christian movements which influenced the Celtic regions had a remarkable diversity of forms and origins. Indeed, some of these allegedly 'Celtic' characteristics may be found

SCOTTISH BULLETIN OF EVANGELICAL THEOLOGY

in other types of religious experience; the people of South America have produced an expression of Roman Catholicism which is replete with cultural adaptation. Other definitions too tend to sit uneasily with the evidence which the book itself contains. It does look as if later 'Celts' (if one may persist in using a relatively modern, and potentially misleading, portmanteau term), especially after 1500 in Wales and Scotland, did in fact relish the tutelage of the menacing, 'dark North African', and found great need of a Redeemer and Saviour from their sins. Indeed, if the Celtic *Lebensraum* was, in reality, devoid of such concepts, and if an awareness of God's judgement on sin, whether original or inherited or acquired, was not present before 1500, it makes it all the harder to explain why the Scottish Highlands and Wales absorbed such an intense type of Reformed spirituality, which was periodically invigorated by immensely deep awakenings or 'revivals'. The essay by Terence McCaughey on 'Protestantism and Scottish Highland Culture', and particularly Tudur Jones's piece on 'The Evangelical Revival in Wales: A Study in Spirituality', keep the balance right in respect of such thinking. The difficulty with these two fine essays is, however, that they seem strangely out of time relative to what has normally been regarded as the active period of 'Celtic Christianity', from about A.D. 400 to 1100.

In assessing 'Celtic Christianity', and in determining any original, uniquely distinctive core, the most critical factor to bear in mind is indeed that which has been identified last by Professor Mackey, namely the manner in which the Celts have absorbed, and adapted for themselves, new religious and philosophical concepts across the centuries, and it is perhaps this, along with other factors, that makes the search for 'Celtic Christianity' such a dangerous and elusive experience. Far from being isolated Shangri Las in the west, the Celtic areas of the British Isles have experienced invasion after invasion, both physical and spiritual, which have altered their complexions beyond the recognition of succeeding generations. Right from the start, there must be a critical awareness of the immense social, cultural, religious and political pressures (plural) that have shaped and re-shaped the Celtic countries (plural) across the centuries (equally plural); such awareness must set time-limits, recognise different religious bodies within the Celtic folds, and look scrupulously at available sources, recognising their validity only for the periods to which they belong. Extrapolation beyond these limits can result in confusion. We are dealing with different expressions of Christianity within the Celtic lands at different periods in history, and quite probably we will perceive not one form of Celtic Christianity, but several, in different Celtic contexts. To catch any permanent features, found in all Celtic countries (Wales, Cornwall,

CELTIC CHRISTIANITY: WHAT IS IT AND WHEN WAS IT?

Brittany, Ireland, Scotland, Man) we have to use a net with a very fine mesh. Even for the period before 1066, this diversity may exist, and we may have to ask whether the initial concept of a single, uniform 'Celtic Church', the cradle of any 'Celtic Christianity', is itself defensible (see Kathleen Hughes, 'The Celtic Church: Is This a Valid Concept?', *Cambridge Medieval Celtic Studies* 1 (Summer 1981), pp. 1-20).

It is the strength of this book that it raises all of these questions as it takes us sweeping, in a rich variety of styles, through time and space. What it shows is a continuous recreation of, and realignment to, new expressions of Christianity within the Celtic lands. With every recreation and realignment, the possibility of retaining a distinctively Celtic core must surely be diminished. There are, of course, survivals from one period to another, especially in ecclesiastical place-names and dedications to saints (as in the names of churches). There are also quite staggering similarities of thought which appear to bridge the centuries and may delude us into believing that the continuum is less fractured than it is. When reading R.P.C. Hanson's account of Saint Patrick, I found myself thinking of Dugald Buchanan, the eighteenth-century Gaelic hymnwriter whose spiritual diary is beguilingly reminiscent of Patrick's *Confession*. There are indeed times when early Celtic saint and late Highland Calvinist seem to share an identical theological base. At other times, however, the differences are stark, but they are nevertheless shot through with correspondences. What, for example, does the modern Highland Calvinist (featured, rather disapprovingly, in McCaughey's essay) have in common with the eighth-century Culdee reform movement, which appeared in Ireland under the leadership of Maelruain of Tallaght? Peter O'Dwyer's essay ('Celtic Monks and Culdee Reform') shows us that the Culdees had many features which would today be identified with orthodox Roman Catholicism, but (although this is not mentioned by O'Dwyer) it would seem that the movement produced one of the strictest tracts on sabbath observance known in western Europe, namely the *Cáin Domnaig* ('The Law of Sunday') – a tract which was edited by Professor Donald MacLean of the Free Church of Scotland in 1926. As a result, Highland Sabbatarians have often appealed to the 'Celtic Church' (singular, of course, and undivided into movements) in defence of their position.

If these particular correspondences across time teach us anything about the spiritual response of the Celtic peoples, it is that, at all times and in all places, some, at least, had a tendency to embrace a deeply serious form of religious experience. They were by no means as 'laid back' about God's (assumed) presence as Professor Mackey might have us believe. They were in deadly earnest about the search for him. Others, of course, went the other way, and made a liberal

SCOTTISH BULLETIN OF EVANGELICAL THEOLOGY

accommodation with secular culture, as Terence McCaughey's essay on 'Protestantism and Scottish Highland Culture' makes clear. But is even this a peculiarly 'Celtic' response? Is it even peculiarly 'Christian' when it comes to the bit? Does Islam not show some of the same tendencies, in the battle between 'fundamentalists' and 'moderates'?

In spite of the correspondences, however, it is the reshaping of religious experience, and the resulting differences, that this book underscores. It is amusing to note Hanson's impatience with the reshaping of Patrick and 'the growth of a large jungle of popular nonsense associated with his name'. I felt sorry that Hanson had not shown us more of that jungle, which may be a better reflection of the character of 'Celtic Christianity' (as a total entity) than the clinical reconstruction of the historical St Patrick. Glanmor Williams' essay on 'Medieval Wales and the Reformation' shows that Protestants were good at reconstructing, or hijacking, the past to suit their own ends, because they were very much aware of the *differences* between themselves and previous generations. We have to read the opposite interpretation into the special pleading. Rather amusingly, Williams himself swallows the bait, and concludes by asserting that these same Reformers preserved the 'autonomy of the early Celtic Church and the virtues of its leading figures'. He concludes by assuring us that the Roman Catholics could have done the same if social and political circumstances had favoured their ascendancy.

So much for 'virtues' and other non-specific concepts, but what about the doctrines of these early 'leading figures'? Were these preserved too? This book, on the whole, has little to say about doctrine (partly because potential contributors were a little tardy in this area), and it gives a prominent place only to Pelagius, in M. Forthomme Nicholson's chapter, 'Celtic Theology: Pelagius'. As the title of this chapter implies, the British theologian and 'heretic', Pelagius, is seen as the prime representative of *proper* 'Celtic Christianity', although he was disowned by representatives of the Celtic Church(es) long before 1066. On the other hand, Tudur Jones, quoting Professor R. M. Jones, tells us confidently that

'Augustinian theology (at least with the exception of its ideas about the nature of the Church) has provided the main highway for Welsh thought...from the time when Welsh literature was born across thirteen hundred years until the middle of the nineteenth century.' This suggestion takes us right back to the Age of the Saints in Celtic Christianity.

Surely the point here is that one cannot build up Pelagius at the expense of Augustine: differences in theological perspective were more than apparent even in the era of the real Celtic Church(es). Celts enjoyed Pelagius, and had a fondness for Augustine too. But

CELTIC CHRISTIANITY: WHAT IS IT AND WHEN WAS IT?

even if Augustine's influence can be detected across the centuries, does this give any grounds for believing that the continuum is complete back to the Age of the Celtic Saints? Was not Augustinianism revived and reinvigorated at strategic junctures in the history of the Church (e.g. at the time of the Reformation)?

The search for Celtic roots and Celtic continua throughout the centuries appears to have caused some uneasy tensions for some writers. Tudur Jones, having written splendidly about the 'The Evangelical Revival in Wales', feels constrained to take some 'backward looks', helped along by the thoughts of medieval mystics. This blunts the edge of his sharp portrayal of the concerns of Howel Harris and William Williams, whose hymns, Jones tells us memorably, were not 'sentimental lyrics for those who hoped to go to heaven in a rocking-chair'. On the other hand, Martin MacNamara, in his piece on 'Celtic Scriptures', expresses serious doubts about the validity of applying the term 'Celtic', and settles more happily on the side of the Irish Church. MacNamara's warnings and questionings come right at the end of the book. A couple of others, notably Hilary Richardson in her chapter on 'Celtic Art', are rather less than cautious, and make sweeping generalisations. Richardson speculates: 'If the native tongue had been exploited by the Church [in Wales] from the earliest times, as in Armenia for instance, a solidarity might have been maintained; but it was not to be.' Armenia is a bit remote. Where does this leave the evidence of those homilies preached in Old and Early Middle Irish by clerics in Ireland, and available in part in such major works as Atkinson's *Passions and Homilies from Leabhar Breac*? As for Wales itself, could it be that our view is distorted by lack of sources, or merely by failure to understand the existing evidence?

On the whole, it can be said that the essays in this book are at their best and most convincing when the writers have a clear grasp of primary sources, especially those in the original Celtic languages (from which, after all, they have taken the concept of 'Celticness'). Thus Diarmuid O Laoghaire's essay on 'Prayers and Hymns in the Vernacular' carries conviction because he quotes extensively from the prayers and hymns, and, while I would not share the same theological presuppositions as the author, I found myself agreeing with both his argument and his method in his delightfully translucent presentation. Similarly O'Donoghue's piece on 'St Patrick's Breastplate' supplies a text (in translation), and consequently catches form and spirit in a memorable manner. Remoteness from original Celtic sources tends to give an exotic, Yeatsian flavour to Thomas Finan's 'Hiberno-Latin Christian Literature', where the 'Latin' takes precedence over the 'Hiberno-'. Joseph O'Leary, in 'The Spiritual Upshot of *Ulysses*', has no link with any source-document in Irish, and has created his own

SCOTTISH BULLETIN OF EVANGELICAL THEOLOGY

world of 'contemporary Celtic spirituality', made all the harder to penetrate by his Joycean use of language. Yet closeness to sources in Irish or Welsh can be a misleading indicator of genuine 'Celticness'. Only the most elastic of Celtic parameters could allow the admission of the twentieth-century Cork poet, Seán O Ríordáin, as an exemplar of Celtic spirituality, in spite of the modern Irish sources used in Robert Welch's essay.

This book, which is thus very wide in its scope, contains a couple of mini-books or chapters that are crying out to be expanded as books: for example, the late Cardinal O Fiaich's chapter on 'Irish Monks on the Continent' (summarising some of his earlier scholarship). Pre-eminently in need of expansion is Terence McCaughey's piece on 'Protestantism and Scottish Highland Culture'. Although Celtic preoccupations drop far out of sight in this chapter, it is none the worse for that. Yet, concentrated as it is, its sweep is too broad, and it tends not to distinguish clearly enough between the different types of Protestantism which were, and still are, present in the Highlands. Overall, however, it is a very useful survey of how religious themes penetrated social and literary awareness. The author's parting shot – that the espousal of an historical approach to Scripture would 'liberate people from an anachronistic and slavish relationship to their own past' – seems to overlook the (very Celtic?) fact that supernaturalism is what Highlanders look for in their religious experience – and perhaps in their secular experience too. I suspect that a sermon on Deutero-Isaiah would not be greeted with much enthusiasm in Crossbost, Kilmuir or Scarista.

In conclusion, it has to be said that this book is not the beginners' introduction to Celtic Christianity that its title suggests. It lacks the clear articulation of basic information which one might expect in an introductory volume. (Beginners may find that their initial questions are satisfied more readily by Kathleen Hughes and Ann Hamlin, *The Modern Traveller to the Early Irish Church*, London, 1977, and Siân Victory, *The Celtic Church in Wales*, London, 1977.) Instead, it is a collection of essays, some being of a fairly specialised nature, and all of them covering their own ground on their own terms without a central integrating theme. The important, central theme which Professor Mackey identifies – the Celts' capacity to adapt themselves to new forms of religious experience, while retaining or re-employing aspects of their earlier culture – is not directly tackled in the essays, although several (especially those of Williams, Jones and McCaughey) move in that direction. Because of its varied nature, the collection will be best understood by the person who is already initiated, and who knows how to read the signals which are being emitted by each chapter. Discernment will be

CELTIC CHRISTIANITY: WHAT IS IT AND WHEN WAS IT?

required in assessing the validity of the various cases that are presented. For the reader who exercises such discernment, however, this is a very stimulating and enjoyable book which demonstrates the initial dangers and rewards of searching for a specifically Celtic identity in religious experience. If Professor Mackey's aim is to provoke debate, discussion and future exploration, he has certainly provided an excellent starting-point.