



UNIVERSITY OF WALES TRINITY SAINT DAVID

**A World Renewed: The Doctrine of Creation in
Insular Christianity 400 – 800 CE**

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*A dissertation submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements of the
MA Celtic Studies*

Master's Degrees by Examination and Dissertation

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Abstract

The thesis explores the understanding of creation and the natural world held by Christian missionaries in insular Britain between 400 and 800 CE. The thesis argues that rather than being characterised by an eco-friendly approach to the natural world advocated by contemporary exponents of 'Celtic Christianity', practitioners found the natural world complex and challenging, and drew on a wide range of theological and liturgical strategies to make sense of the world and exercise mastery over it. Three Saint's lives are drawn upon to illustrate these strategies which were informed by a range of theological traditions with particular links with Eastern monasticism.

Acknowledgements

My interest in 'Celtic Christianity' began in 2015 with the 'Igniting the Flame' course run by the Community of Aidan and Hilda, and I am grateful to the authors and tutors of the course for their encouragement and support. This dissertation itself was written in challenging personal circumstances. These included being flooded out of our house on Christmas Eve 2020, requiring us to live in temporary accommodation for over a year while renovation took place. I am grateful to all my children and their spouses who worked very hard to help us with insurers, accommodation agencies and builders. Return to the house was followed by the failure of my kidneys resulting in several extended hospital stays and thrice weekly kidney dialysis. My gratitude goes to the medical and nursing staff of the Oxford Kidney Unit at the Churchill Hospital without whose skill and support, I would not be here, let alone completing a dissertation.

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Soli deo gloria.

Introduction

*I bind to myself to-day,
The power of Heaven,
The light of the Sun,
The whiteness of Snow,
The force of Fire,
The flashing of lightning,
The velocity of Wind,
The depth of the Sea,
The stability of the Earth,
The hardness of Rocks.¹*

A persistent theme of writers in the modern tradition that has come to be known as ‘Celtic Christianity’ is that, by contrast with mainstream Christianity, it is creation-based, in harmony with the natural world. This creation-oriented, eco-friendly faith, is, it is claimed, rooted in the development of insular Christianity in the post-Roman period (400 – 800 CE) and offers a distinctive vision of what a ‘green’ Christianity might look like².

It is not disputed that contemporary writers in the ‘Celtic Christian’ tradition (although the extent to which the title ‘Celtic’ is meaningful is highly disputed³) and in the New Monastic movement do indeed share a creation – friendly faith.

¹Extract from ‘St. Patrick’s Breastplate’ trans J H Todd *St. Patrick, apostle of Ireland, a memoir of his life and mission*, (Dublin, 1864).

² For example: Simpson, R *Exploring Celtic Spirituality* (London, Kevin Mayhew 1995), Newell, J P *Christ of the Celts: The Healing of Creation* (Iona, Wild Goose Publications 2004)

³ Meek, D *The Quest for Celtic Christianity* (Edinburgh, Handsel Press, 2000); Bradley, I *Following the Celtic Way: A New Assessment of Celtic Christianity* (London, Darton, Longman and Todd, 2018)

It is far less clear that this theology has any historic, let alone denominational, basis in insular history.

And yet, amongst the earliest documentation of insular Christianity that we possess (and there is very little of this) there appears to be a greater engagement with the natural world than one finds in Western Catholicism generally and this dissertation sets out to explore the extent of this engagement, and to try and understand the historical and theological significance of this engagement.

With the exception of Gildas' *De Excidio Britanniae* (dated around 540 CE) and Bede's *Historia Ecclesiastica Gentis Anglorum* (dated around 730 CE), one of the major sources of information for the period lie in the Saints Lives. And whilst many of these were composed hundreds of years after the events they describe and in pursuit of specific ecclesiastical and political goals, a small handful are more or less contemporary with the events they describe. That does not make them any easier as sources to use, since they are hagiographies rather than biographies and need to be interpreted as such. The methodological approach of this dissertation is to examine three such lives in

some depth and to do so theologically, rather than historically or in terms of literary composition.⁴

The dissertation is structured as follows: after an introductory discussion of the case for a nature – friendly, creation – focused ‘Celtic Christianity’, we turn to an introduction to three hagiographic writings, with a methodological discussion of their usage, followed by a detailed review of key aspects of the interaction of their central characters with the natural world. The three chosen *Lives* are those of *Saint Germanus of Auxerre* (c.470 CE), *Saint Samson of Dol* (c.610 CE) and Adomnan’s *Life of Saint Columba* (c.690).

Having elucidated some key elements of the evidence, we go on to discuss three aspects of the approach to the created order implied by the evidence: viz the non-urban context of insular Christianity; the mastery of nature as a mission strategy and the soteriological understanding of Creation.

The dissertation concludes with a discussion of the place of insular Christianity and its understanding of the natural world in the wider context of Western Catholicism, especially the theological influence of Ambrose of Milan

⁴ Krajewski, E M G *Archetypal Narratives: Pattern and Parable in the Lives of Three Saints* (Turnhout, Brepols, 2018); Cartwright, J (ed) *Celtic Hagiography and Saints’ Cults* (Cardiff, University of Wales Press, 2003)

and the links with Eastern Christianity via the Desert Fathers and the monastery of John Cassian at Lerins.

For reasons that will become obvious, the dissertation refers to the theological and liturgical practices in the British Isles (and Brittany) as *insular* Christianity with the title *Celtic* Christianity reserved for the contemporary movement of that name.

‘Celtic Christianity’ and Green theology

The former warden of the Iona community, J Philip Newell writes that

‘the feature of Celtic spirituality that is probably most widely recognised, both within and outside the Church is its creation emphasis’⁵.

In *‘some of the old prayers from the Western Isles of Scotland’*, [he writes] *‘the lights of the skies, the sun and moon and stars, are referred to as graces, the spiritual coming through the physical, and God is seen as the Life within all life and not just as the Creator who set life in motion from afar’⁶*

Newell, elsewhere writes of a Hebridean tradition of greeting the rising of the sun, and the moon, with reverence as ‘the lights of God’ and of a specific tradition of expecting guidance from the animal kingdom in important matters of faith and life⁷

Going beyond these specific examples, Ray Simpson, of the Community of Aidan and Hilda, writes of a fundamental split in the Western Churches

⁵ Newell, J P *Listening for the Heartbeat of God: A Celtic Spirituality* (London, SPCK 1997) p.3

⁶ Ibid p.4

⁷ Newell, J P *Christ of the Celts* op.cit p.53

between faith and nature, religion and science which has led to the violation of the earth and ecological destruction. By contrast, he writes of Celtic Christianity as seeing creation as loveable and enjoyable in its own right (rather than exploited for our purposes) and expecting God to transform the created world into the fullness of divine glory in due course. In the meantime, Christians are to fulfil the mandate of Genesis 1:28 to act as stewards of creation⁸.

Contemporary Celtic Christianity emerged in Britain in the 1960s amongst Anglicans and Roman Catholics impacted by the charismatic renewal movement and seeking a version of Christianity that was non-hierarchical, ecumenical, woman-friendly, and community – building. The movement has been strongly linked to the New Monastic movement pioneered in the United Kingdom by the Iona Community in Scotland, and by the Northumbria Community, and the Community of Aidan and Hilda in England. As Donald Meek trenchantly observes, Celtic Christianity's pioneers and leaders are largely English-speaking⁹ and the term 'Celtic' refers less to the native language of practitioners and more to the theological and liturgical materials developed and deployed within the tradition. These materials are usually used in English translation and come from a wide variety of sources, including Alexander

⁸ Simpson, R *Exploring Celtic Spirituality* op.cit pp.115 -127; Simpson, R *Celtic Christianity and the Climate Crisis: Twelve Keys for the future of the Church* (Durham, Sacristy Press,2020)

⁹ Meek *The Quest* op.cit

Carmichael's *Carmina Gadelica*¹⁰, saint's lives, Welsh, Irish and Gaelic prayers and poems and modern materials written in a 'Celtic' style¹¹. The movement has produced a wide range of liturgies, and handbooks for prayer and contemplation. Many of these texts and liturgies are nature-friendly and creation-focused.

However, with the partial exception of the Iona Community, Celtic Christian practitioners see themselves not as a modern movement but as the renewal of a long-buried, uniquely British Christian tradition whose origins lie in developments in Britain after the withdrawal of Roman governance in 410 A.D. Alongside all the characteristics already identified, it is claimed that large parts of Britain were part of an organised church, based around monasteries, rather than dioceses, with a theology that rejected the doctrines of original sin and predestination, favoured the teachings of Pelagius over the teachings of Augustine and were in opposition to the influence of papal Rome.

There are a number of historical problems with this claim. Firstly, although it is true that monastic communities came to have a particular importance in Ireland and the western half of Britain, the basic structure of the Church in Britain, as throughout the Roman world was diocesan, with British bishops

¹⁰ Carmichael, A *Carmina Gadelica: Hymns and Incantations* (London, Legare Street Press, 2022 originally published 1900/1928)

¹¹ E.g. Simpson, R *Complete Celtic Prayers* (Minneapolis, MN, Augsburg Books 2020); Adam, D *Radiance of His Glory* (London, SPCK 2009); Northumbria Community *Celtic Daily Prayer* (London, William Collins, 2015); Iona Community *Iona Abbey Worship Book* (Glasgow, Wild Goose Publications, 2017)

attending ecumenical synods throughout the fourth century¹². Patrick in his *Confessio*¹³ describes a diocesan structure in Western Britain in the 4th century and Bede reports a meeting between Augustine of Canterbury and existing British bishops in 603 CE¹⁴. All of these dioceses were part of the wider Western Catholic church and had continuing relationships (especially) with Gaul.

The question of Pelagian influence is more complicated. St. Germanus of Auxerre made at least one and possibly two visits in the early 5th century to combat Pelagian teaching¹⁵. However, it is very unlikely that Pelagianism existed as a coherent theological position in Britain or anywhere else¹⁶, and the extent to which it was viewed as a heresy varied widely across the Roman world. Despite the efforts of some scholars to suggest otherwise¹⁷, the evidence of a widespread, heretical, Pelagianism in Britain or anywhere else is sparse to non-existent. The doctrines of original sin and predestination are a different matter

¹² Lambert, M *Christians and Pagans: The Conversion of Britain from Alban to Bede* (Newhaven MA, Yale University Press, 2010); Yorke, B *The Conversion of Britain 600 – 800* (London. Pearson, Longman, 2006); Charles-Edwards, T M *Wales and the Britons 350 – 1064* (Oxford, University Press, 2013); Smith, A P *Warlords and Holy Men: Scotland 80 – 1000* (Edinburgh, University Press, 1989); Charles-Edward, T M *Early Christian Ireland* (Cambridge, University Press, 2008)

¹³ Patrick, *Declaration of the Great Works of God* in Davies, O (ed. and trans) *Celtic Spirituality* (New York, Paulist Press, 1999) pp. 67-83

¹⁴ Bede: *The Ecclesiastical History of the English People (c.731)* (ed. and trans. McClure, J and Collins, R) (Oxford, University Press, 1969) p.71

¹⁵ Constantius of Lyons *Life of St. Germanus of Auxerre* (ca. 465) in Noble, T F X and Head, T (eds and trans.) *Soldiers of Christ: Saints and Saints Lives from Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages* (Pennsylvania, State University Press 1995) pp.79 - 106

¹⁶ MacCullough, D A *History of Christianity* (London, Penguin, 2009) pp. 306 – 8; Bonner, A *The Myth of Pelagianism* (Oxford, University Press, 2018)

¹⁷ Herren, M W and Brown, S A *Christ in Celtic Christianity* Studies in Celtic History XX (Woodbridge, Boydell and Brewer, 2002). Markus, G 'Pelagianism and the Common Celtic Church' *The Innes Review* vol. 56 no. 2 (Autumn 2005) 165-213

as these were novel doctrines being promulgated at the end of the fourth and beginning of the fifth centuries¹⁸. There is evidence that Patrick was familiar with the Augustinian teaching on divine grace in the mid- 5th century¹⁹, but these ideas remained controversial well into the sixth century and were never adopted by large parts of the Christian world, especially in the East. It is worth remembering Bede's observation in *Historica Ecclesiastica* that when Augustine of Canterbury met the British Bishops in 603, the principal areas of difference were over monastic tonsure, the administration of baptism, and Augustine's authority²⁰. By the Synod of Whitby in 664, that list had only expanded to include different approaches to the dating of Easter²¹.

The idea, then, of a distinctive approach to the Christian faith in the British Isles seems unlikely, and the idea that this was 'Celtic' even more unlikely, not least because many of the themes of 'Celtic Christianity' are also found in Anglian churches in Northumbria and further afield in England.²² The idea of a common Celtic identity is largely a product of nineteenth century romanticism²³. Britain in the post – Roman world was divided on tribal lines²⁴,

¹⁸ MacCullough, History op. cit. pp.306 - 8

¹⁹ Bonner, A 'Was Patrick influenced by the teaching of Pelagius?' *The Journal of Theological Studies*, NS, Vol. 63, Pt 2, (2012) pp.572 -607

²⁰ Bede op.cit. pp.71 -73

²¹ Corning, C *The Celtic and Roman Traditions: Conflict and Consensus in the Early Medieval Church* (Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2006)

²² Brookes, B *The Restoration of Creation in the early Anglo-Saxon Vitae of Cuthbert and Guthlac* (unpublished DPhil thesis, Lincoln College, Oxford, 2016)

²³ Collis, J *The Celts: Origins, Myths, Inventions* (Stroud, Tempus, 2003)

²⁴ Laycock, S *Britannia: The Failed State* (Cheltenham, The History Press, 2008); Laycock, S *Warlords: The Struggle for Power in Post = Roman Britain* (Cheltenham, The History Press, 2009);

speaking five different languages²⁵, many of which were mutually incomprehensible²⁶ and the evidence is less of a common identity than of internecine warfare.

However, that did not mean that there were no distinctions between insular Christianity and continental Catholicism. O'Loughlin suggests the useful concept of 'local theologies'²⁷, whilst Bradley suggests that some specific groupings could share common theological and liturgical approaches e.g. those foundations originating with Iona might reasonably be called 'Columban', and at this stage in Western Christianity there were different centres of influence other than papal Rome and Mayhew – Smith suggests that British churches show evidence of the influence of Milan under Saint Ambrose,²⁸ with its distinctive approach to the administration of baptism.

Insular Christianity and the Natural World: The evidence

Having dismissed the idea of a continuing, creation-focused, nature – friendly Christian tradition in the British Isles, it is important to note that we are still left with a body of evidence demonstrating the importance of interaction with the natural world. This includes poetry, prayers, liturgy and secular narratives,

²⁵ Bede op.cit. p.10

²⁶ Adomnan of Iona *The Life of Saint Columba* (c. 690) (trans Sharpe, R) London, Penguin, 1991) p.136

²⁷ O'Loughlin, T *Celtic Theology: Humanity, World and God in Early Irish Writings* (London, Continuum, 2000) p.23 ; Bradley, I *Following the Celtic Way: A New Assessment of Celtic Christianity* (London, Darton, Lingman and Todd, 2018)p. 23

²⁸ Mayhew Smith, N *The Naked Hermit: A Journey to the Heart of Celtic Britain* (London, SPCK, 2019) 149 - 153: see also his PhD thesis *Nature rituals of the early medieval church in Britain Christian cosmology and the conversion of the British landscape from Germanus to Bede* unpublished, London, Roehampton University, 2018)

although much of it falls outside the time parameters of this study. Within this time period, though, a major source are the Saints' lives where people referred to as 'holy men' and 'holy women' are shown in intensive interaction with the natural world. Saints' lives are notoriously difficult to interpret with many of them being written long after the supposed events, and in a style that emphasises the miraculous, with many lives clearly re-using events from earlier lives, or echoing Biblical accounts – especially the New Testament accounts of Jesus.

In what follows, we explore different ways of reading and interpreting hagiographical accounts before exploring in depth incidents from three Lives, each of which was written within living memory of the person at the centre of the Life to try and establish the nature of the Saint's interaction with the natural world.

Hagiography and Historicity: Three Saints' Lives

Interpreting hagiographic writing can be complicated. The origins of hagiography itself are complex. They include Hellenistic tales of 'wonder-working', Biblical (especially New Testament) accounts and the apocryphal Gospels of 2nd and 3rd centuries before the establishment of the New Testament canon. They were particularly shaped around tales of the early

martyrs of the Christian faith which developed from the 3rd century onwards in parallel with the veneration of martyr's relics and burial places²⁹.

With the legitimization of the Christian faith under Constantine, the centrality of martyrdom as a goal of the Christian life was gradually replaced by a focus on asceticism, particularly in accounts of the Syrian 'pillar saints' and, latterly, the Desert fathers, with Athanasius' *Life of Antony*³⁰ and Sulpicius Severus' *Life of Martin of Tours*³¹ providing well – used models for the developing hagiographic tradition.

What is a hagiography seeking to achieve? It is not a strictly biographical account of a life well-lived, nor is it an historical account of recent events. The most important point is that hagiography in the medieval sense is profoundly Christian, written generally by monks in monasteries³². Hagiographies are, therefore, moral tales, which invite the hearer to respond. The particular type of response varies from hagiography to hagiography. Arguably the tale of *Saint Brendan the Navigator*³³ was aimed at encouraging monks to enter fully into the performance of the liturgy. Muirchu's *Life of Patrick*³⁴, set wholly around the Easter Eucharist has a similar thrust. Others, such as *St. Germanus of Auxerre*

²⁹ Brown, P *The Cult of the Saints* (2nd ed. London, SCM Press 2012) (original: 1969)

³⁰ Athanasius *The Life of Anthony of Egypt* (trans. and ed. Claiborne, S and Haase, A (Westmont, Ill, IVP. 2012)

³¹ Sulpicius Severus *Life of Saint Martin* (c. 460) in the *Complete Works of Sulpicius Severus* (trans. Roberts, A) (Waterford, Cross Reach Publications, 2019) (original pub. 1895)

³² Palmer, J T *Early Medieval Hagiography* (London, ARC Humanities Press, 2018); Harvey, S A 'Martyr Passions and Hagiography' in Harvey S A and Hunter D G *The Oxford Handbook of Early Christian Studies* (Oxford, University Press, 2008) pp. 603 - 627

³³ *The Voyage of Saint Brendan* (ed. and trans. O'Meara, J J (London, Colin Smythe, 1991)

³⁴ Muirchu *Life of Patrick* in Davies, O *Celtic Spirituality* (New York, Paulist Press, 1989)

celebrate orthodoxy over heresy. Whatever the specific thrust, they are intended to provide examples to us to follow in the footsteps of the saint. Krajewski³⁵ classifies hagiography as a type of parable in which the purpose of the tale is not only to celebrate the life of the central character, but to encourage the reader to emulate the Life being described.

And this set of purposes explains why so many of the themes and incidents are repeated from hagiography to hagiography: because the point is that *this* is how the saint would have been expected to behave, in the same way that earlier martyr tales would emphasise holy suffering, and courageous death, often in very stereotypical ways.

Insular Britain in the post – Roman period was host to a number of Saint's Lives. Amongst those are three where the author appears to have been writing within living memory of the subject and in what follows are extracts that illustrate the engagement of the central character with the natural world.

St. Germanus of Auxerre

This Life was written in Gaul around the year 465 CE by Constantius of Lyons. Saint Germanus is an archetypal missionary bishop whose ministry is interspersed with individual healings and exorcisms, mixed in with mediation between warring communities. His life is lived on the road, travelling around

³⁵ Krajewski, E M G *Archetypal Narratives: Pattern and Parable in the Lives of Three Saints* (Turnhout, Brepols, 2018)

Gaul, and Italy, ending up at the Imperial court in Ravenna. For our purposes, the narrative includes two trips to Britain to tackle the presence of Pelagian teaching. The success of both trips is attributed to the supernatural healing of family members of the ruling elite, and a major victory over Saxon and Pictish invaders. The narrative includes this particularly significant encounter with a cross-Channel storm:

'Then they embarked upon the ocean under the leadership and inspiration of Christ, who, in the midst of danger, kept His servants safe and proved their worth. At first, when the ship put out to sea, she ran before light breezes blowing from the Bay of Gaul until she was in mid-channel where, gaze as you might, you could see nothing but sky and water. Then it was not long before the ocean was assaulted by the violence of demons, haters of religion, who were livid with malice at the site of such great men hastening to bring salvation to the nations. They heaped up dangers, roused the gales, hid the heavens and the day under a night of clouds, and filled the thick darkness with the terrors of the sea and air. The sails could not resist the fury of the winds and the fragile craft scarcely sustained the weight of the waters. The sailors were powerless and abandoned their efforts; the vessel was navigated by prayer and not by muscles. And at that point the leader himself, the bishop, his body worn out, in his weariness went to sleep.

Then indeed did the storm put forth its strength; it was as if a restraining hand had gone. Before long the vessel was actually being swamped by the waves that swept over it. At last, the blessed Lupus and all the excited throng aroused their chief, to match him against the raging elements. He, all the more steadfast for the very immensity of the danger, in the name of Christ, chided the ocean, pleading the cause of religion against the savagery of the gales. Then, taking some oil, he lightly sprinkled the waves in the name of the Trinity, and this diminished their fury. Consulting his colleague, he now called upon everybody; and prayer was poured out by their united voice.

And there was God! The enemies of souls were put to flight, the air became clear and calm, the contrary winds were turned to aid the voyage, the currents flowed in the

*service of the ship. Thus, great distances were covered and soon all were enjoying repose on the desired shore*³⁶.

The obvious parallel is with the story of Jesus and his disciples on the Sea of Galilee in Mark: 4:35 -40 but there are some unique differences. Firstly, we read that the storm is demon – generated and a little later on Constantius tells us that demons confessed that this was of their doing. Secondly, we are told that the wakeful bishop exercised a brake on the violence of the storm, a brake that was lost when he slept – in other words, control of nature was a normal part of the ministry of the bishop. Thirdly, the bishop’s intervention took a liturgical form, of an exorcism of the sea. Mayhew – Smith suggests that one of the distinctive features of the insular baptismal rite was an exorcism of the water before immersion – in other words that a natural feature such as water might be hostile to God and man. If he is right, that may be what we are seeing in this account. In addition, even after the exorcism, control of the storm required united prayer from all present – a vivid illustration of St. Paul’s injunction to ‘pray continuously’

St. Samson of Dol

Saint Germanus is not alone in demonstrating divine mastery over a disordered natural world. Saint Sampson, a Welsh disciple of Saint Illtud whose ministry ranges widely over the western edges of Britain before settling in Brittany finds

³⁶ Constantius of Lyons op.cit. p.86

himself in a number of dangerous situations where nature is a direct threat. In the first, he survives an attempt to poison him:

But while Saint Sampson was at prayer, forthwith the Spirit of God revealed to him these things and the evil of late wrought against him. Nevertheless, trusting in the promise of the Lord, mindful of the word of the Gospel where Christ says concerning his faithful who trust in him, ‘if they shall drink’, He says, “any deadly thing it shall not hurt them”, and so on, he entered the refectory exceeding glad... And so, blessing the vessels for the brothers and making the sign of the Cross on his own, without any wavering of mind he drank it dry and never felt even the slightest heartache from it.
³⁷

Unlike St. Germanus, here a natural substance is used by a corrupted human being to attempt harm, a harm which does not come about. However, like St. Germanus, as the tale unfolds, we learn of a demonic motivation behind the jealous act which requires exorcism and penance to resolve.

But for Saint Sampson, it is not just the manipulation of nature by jealous humans inspired by the demonic. The natural world itself can be just as threatening. On one missionary journey, the saint and his companions cross the path of a ‘fire-breathing serpent’. The saint confronts the serpent by reciting one of the psalms, and encircling the snake with a prayer of protection and the sign of the Cross prevents the serpent from attempting to attack the saint before the snake kills itself. ³⁸

³⁷ St. Sampson p.23

³⁸ Op cit. p.35

As with Germanus of Auxerre, the presence of the saint himself is sufficient to tame an aggressive animal and a liturgical intervention (prayer plus signing of the Cross) not only protects but destroys the threat.

However, it is not only liturgy that binds dangerous animals. Sometimes the resolute presence of the saint alone is sufficient:

The [poisonous] serpent, however, as soon as it saw him, trembled exceedingly and was disposed to turn itself and bite its tail with passion; but he, quickly seizing the linen girdle that was around him. Without more ado, slipped it on its neck and dragging the beast near to him, flung it from a certain height and charged it in the name of Jesus Christ not to live any more.³⁹

But it is not only in warding off immediate danger that the saint intervenes in the natural world. In a later example, the saint finds himself in a cave without a water supply and resolves the difficulty after the manner of Moses by inserting his staff in the ground and releasing a spring of “sweet water”⁴⁰

St. Sampson, then demonstrates a number of different ways of interacting with a dangerous natural world: from producing water in a dry land, to neutralizing poison in the manner of St. Paul⁴¹ to direct confrontation with wild beasts to protect his companions.

³⁹ Op.cit. p.51

⁴⁰ Op.cit p.43

⁴¹ Acts 28: 3-4

St. Columba

When we turn to St. Columba, the founder of the monastery on Iona, in an account written by his successor, Adomnan, around a century after his death, we find all of these interventions and more. Columba turns water into wine⁴², makes bitter fruit sweet, speeds up the growth of the crop, draws water from the rock, exorcises wells and demon-infested milk pails, stills the sea; many of these episodes being consciously reminiscent of incidents from Scripture and earlier lives, some of which we have considered. But perhaps his most famous intervention is this:

Once, on another occasion, when the blessed man stayed for some days in the land of the Picts, he had to cross the River Ness. When he reached its bank, he saw some of the local people burying a poor fellow. They said they had seen a water beast snatch him and maul him savagely as he was swimming not long before....The blessed man having been told all this, astonished them by sending one of his companions to swim across the river... but the beast was lying low on the riverbed, its appetite not so much sated as whetted for prey. It could sense that the water above was stirred by the swimmer, and suddenly swam up to the surface, rushing open-mouthed with a great roar towards the man as he was swimming midstream. All the bystanders, both the heathen and the brethren. Froze in terror, but the blessed man raised his holy hand and made the sign of the cross in the air, and invoking the name of God, he commanded the fierce beast, saying

‘Go no further. Do not touch the man. Go back at once.’

*At the sound of the saint’s voice, the beast fled in terror so fast one might have thought it was pulled back with ropes....even the heathen natives who were present at the time were so moved by the greatness of the miracle they had witnessed that they too magnified the God of the Christians.*⁴³

⁴² Adomnan of Iona op.cit p.154

⁴³ Op.cit pp.175-6

Here we see not only the control over dangerous nature evidenced by the saint, but that such an intervention could be evangelistic in outcome if not in intent. We will return to this point later.

However, having established from a very small sample of Saint's Lives that the natural world formed a complex, and at times, challenging context for insular Christianity, we now go on to explore three very different ways in which nature impacted upon Christian missionary activity in the period in question.

Insular Christianity: Faith in a non-urban context

Christianity in Late Antiquity was fundamentally an urban phenomenon, beginning in the great metropolises of the Roman world with patriarchs in the great cities of Antioch, Jerusalem, Alexandria, Constantinople, and, of course, Rome, and bishops located in civitas capitals throughout the Empire.

But with the decline of imperial fortunes, especially in the Western Empire, this began to change drastically from the beginning of the fifth century, not least in the western provinces of Britannia, which was lost to the Empire after 410 CE. Quite how the Christian church was organised in Britain between the reigns of Constantine I and Constantine III is very unclear, but we know from the mission of Augustine of Canterbury from 597 that Pope Gregory the Great thought that Britain should have two metropolitans (in London and York) and 29 diocesan bishops who would be based in civitas capitals.

Nothing could have been further from the truth in most of sixth century Britain, which was rapidly developing into a non-urban, kin-based society.⁴⁴ With the possible exception of part of the Western provinces, *civitas* capitals had gone into decline in the latter part of the fourth century, with the local elites being based firstly in rural villas, and latterly in refortified tribal hillforts. Did bishops and their churches relocate with other members of the local elite? Or do they become mobile evangelists? We do not know. Augustine found a small functioning church in Canterbury, and the shrines of Alban in Verulamium and the Caerleon saints were still attracting pilgrims. Augustine himself met a group of British bishops on the borders of the Kingdom of the Hwicce, but the nature of their episcopal and geographical responsibilities are not identified, any more than those described in Patrick's *Confessio*.

The evidence on the ground is extremely patchy with burial customs difficult to interpret, and a great deal of reliance on carved memorial stones in Wales and the West of England, along with place name evidence where settlements incorporating the element 'llan' in its name is assumed to be the base of a local church and those with the element 'eglys' may possibly be the base for a bishop. But the evidence is sparse and ambiguous, although there appears to be evidence not only that Christianity was flourishing in the west of the former Roman province, but also that British evangelists carried the faith to Anglian

⁴⁴ Blair, J *The Church in Anglo-Saxon Society* (Oxford, University Press, 2005) p.8

communities to their east (Hwicce, Wrocensatae, Magonsaete) for which there is no record of Anglo-Saxon conversion campaigns.

Whatever this patchy evidence indicates, it is clearly nothing like the urban civilization of fourth century Britain, where clergy and bishops were stipendiary government officials. Here, clergy and bishops were, if not itinerant, then dependent on land being gifted to them by local landowners with a need to farm, or have farmed, their land in order to survive. That this would have involved a much closer engagement with the natural world than their predecessors or their counterparts in Gaul and Spain seems obvious. If it is the case that bishops and clergy relocated to fortified areas with the local landlords or warlords for protection, then that engagement would have been greater. There was a marked tendency to relocate to sea promontories and natural harbours, to promote trade with the wider world and ensure safety from attack. Similar considerations applied to mountainous areas in Wales and Dal Riata.

Whilst the evidence of what happened to the British church in the fifth and sixth centuries is sparse and ambiguous, there is much better evidence of the other main development in insular Christianity – monasticism. Although this Christian movement began in the Egyptian desert in the 3rd century, it spread quite rapidly to Southern Gaul, and from there up the coast to the Western

part of Britain, and Ireland, becoming firmly established towards the end of the fifth century.

Insular monasticism was a very different animal than medieval monasticism, with each monastery being like a small village, with a mixed population, often but not exclusively kin-based. Monasteries were usually built with a wooden chapel, individual round huts for monks and some common facilities such as a kitchen and refectory. Monks had to till the land, grow crops, harvest them and prepare food, as well as studying Scripture and engaging in corporate prayer. Monasteries often included cells, or daughter establishments for monks seeking a solitary, hermit, life.

Being based on desert monasticism, founders of insular communities tended to look for the British equivalent of desert communities, remote, isolated, areas where survival required hard work. These communities self-seeded: that is, after a while one or more members of the community would set out to found a new monastery in more difficult circumstances. Often the new pioneers would be kin to the existing leadership and the result would be a confederation (a *parochia* or *familia*) of monasteries linked by ties of kinship or friendship.

The *Life of Saint Samson* illustrates this very nicely with the eponymous hero starting under the tutelage of Saint Illtud at Llanilltydfawr, then establishing a new monastery in Cornwall, then creating new monasteries across Wales and

Cornwall to be run by various members of his family, before finally relocating to Dol in Brittany.

The best-known example of this process of monastic evangelization comes from Iona, where Columba starts with one small community of 12 monks on one island, and a century later, Iona is at the centre of a network spread across Dal Riata and the Kingdom of the Picts, westward into northern Ireland, and south into Northumbria.

These monastic networks (and not all were as extensive as the Columban) brought the Christian faith to new communities (the Picts and the Northumbrians), supported members of royal families during dynastic upheavals, wrote and copied documents and at all times toiled on the land to feed themselves.

As communities living on the margins (especially island communities), they were constantly exposed to the challenge of the natural world, had to develop ways of surviving under pressure and demonstrating an ability to master the challenges posed by the natural world.

Whether monk or secular clergy, it is not just the physical engagement with the natural world that is important, but also the intellectual, and especially, theological, engagement that is important

Creation as Soteriology

When Patrick was writing his *Confessio* in the middle of the fifth century, he saw himself at a critical point in human history and the divine economy.

Following the biblical imperative to take the gospel to the ends of the earth, Patrick believed that in proclaiming Christ as far as the Atlantic Ocean, he had gone as far as the ends of the earth (Greek and Roman geography saw the British Isles as the other side of the world-encircling Ocean) and therefore the promised return of Jesus was imminent. The notion that the present age was coming to an end, and a new age had already begun, underlay all theological thinking about the natural world.

This way of thinking begins with Paul's letter to the Romans:

'For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God; for the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God' (Romans 8: 19 – 21)

and then develops in the second century, and especially in the works of

Irenaeus of Lyons⁴⁵, into a full-blown doctrine of creation as salvation. Irenaeus called this theological position 'recapitulation' and argued that with the disobedience of Adam (the first Adam), the whole of creation is negatively affected:

⁴⁵⁴⁵ Behr, J *Irenaeus of Lyons: Identifying Christianity* (Oxford, University Press, 2013)

‘cursed is the ground because of you; in toil you shall eat of it all the days of your life; thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you; (Genesis 3: 17b – 18a)

However, with the incarnation of Jesus (the second Adam) and his obedience to God, the new age has arrived and the destructive forces of nature have begun to go into reverse and the world is moving towards the image seen by Isaiah when he wrote:

The wolf shall live with the lamb; the leopard shall lie down with the kid, the calf and the lion and the fatling together, and a little child shall lead them. The cow and the bear shall graze, their young shall lie down together; and the lion shall eat straw like the ox. The nursing child shall play over the hole of the asp, and the weaned child shall put its hand on the adder’s den. They will not hurt or destroy in all my holy mountain; for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea. (Isaiah 11: 6-9)

For Irenaeus, the logic of the incarnation is the reversal of the Fall of Adam, with all its cosmic consequences, and the progressive unfolding of the New Age in which ultimately, God will be all in all. The expectation then is that the natural world will cease to be a challenge to sinful human beings and become a partner in the divine purpose – the ultimate goal of which is for human beings to become divine.

Whilst strongly identified with Irenaeus and his key texts *Against the Heretics*⁴⁶ and *Demonstration of the Apostolic Preaching*⁴⁷, recapitulation theology was

⁴⁶ Behr, op.cit pp. 73 -198

⁴⁷ Irenaeus of Lyons *Demonstration of the Apostolic Preaching* (c. 190) (ed. and trans. Boer, P & Armitage Robinson, J) (London, Aeterna Press, 2015)

widespread in the Christian world from Justin Martyr⁴⁸ to the development of satisfaction theology by Anselm in *Cur Deus Homo?* In this scheme, the natural world, creation, is part of God's divine purposes for the universe and the study of, and reflection on, nature was a type of *lectio divina*, an opportunity to study the divine purpose by reflecting on the natural world. One of the features of this reflection on nature was the number of commentaries on Genesis 1 – 3, from the Hexameron of Basil of Caesarea⁴⁹ (and other writings of the Cappadocian Fathers⁵⁰), through to Bede in the early 8th century.

It is in this context, not in some eco-friendly Celtic Christianity, that we need to understand the part played by the natural world in insular Christianity in the Late Antique purposes.

This understanding of the place of the natural world in salvation history had two important implications. Firstly, it encouraged practitioners, especially monastic practitioners, to meditate upon nature as part of their seeking understanding of God's purposes. Evagrius Ponticus was especially influential in developing a model of 'natural contemplation' which he saw as a corollary of the contemplation of Scripture⁵¹.

⁴⁸ Young, F *God's Presence* (Cambridge, University Press, 2013) pp.262 -4

⁴⁹ Basil of Caesarea *Hexameron* (c. 360)(London, Amazon, undated)

⁵⁰ Whitworth, P *Three Wise Men from the East* (London, Sacristy Press, 2015)

⁵¹ Bowers, P 'The Doctrine of Creation' in Ashbrook, S and Harvey D (eds) *The Oxford Handbook of Early Christian Studies* (Oxford, University Press, 2008) p.920 - 1

The second implication is to grasp what the insular saints are doing when they engage with the natural world. Mayhew – Smith, in both his doctoral thesis⁵² and his book *The Naked Hermit*⁵³, cites Bede, [who] ‘reflecting on the life and mission of St, Cuthbert of Lindisfarne says: ‘it is no wonder’ that Cuthbert could do all this because an important witness of a holy man or woman was to put right the relationship between God and his creation’.

‘For the most part’, [Bede explains], ‘we have lost dominion over the creation, which was made subject to us, because we ourselves neglect to serve the Lord and Creator of all things’⁵⁴.

As exceptionally holy men, they are exercising the responsibility of stewardship over the created order as God originally intended, in a way that the new age now makes possible for a few who are closely attuned to the divine purpose.

‘Then God said, ‘let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea; and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth’
⁵⁵

This is not divine intervention into a closed natural order, but a reassertion of the stewardship of creation which was the original divine purpose made possible by the arrival of the new age.

Earlier we discussed an incident in the Life of Saint Samson, when he tackled and destroyed a serpent that was harassing a local population. His Life records

⁵² Mayhew Smith *Nature rituals* op. cit

⁵³ Mayhew Smith *The Naked Hermit* op.cit p.41

⁵⁴ Ibid

⁵⁵ Genesis 1:26

no fewer than four clearances of serpents each of which ends with the serpent being instructed to die. This preoccupation with serpents is not accidental: it is acting out part of the Genesis narrative of the Fall:

The Lord God said to the serpent, because you have done this, cursed are you among all animals and among all wild creatures; upon your belly you shall go, and dust you shall eat all the days of your life. I will put enmity between you and the woman and between your offspring and hers; he will strike your head, and you will strike his heel

Although Samson's encounters with serpents are dramatic, they are not alone in Christian tradition beginning with Mark 16:18 where safe handling of snakes is a consequence of the Resurrection and outpouring of the Holy Spirit, through to Paul's potentially fatal encounter on Malta in Acts 28:3. With the exception of Patrick in Ireland where the tradition that he cleared the island of snakes appears to be late, the main Western church has few examples of tackling snakes, but this is much more common in the Eastern churches.

If we think of the interventions of Cuthbert and Samson less as divine interventions and more as the exercise of creation stewardship, a number of other aspects of saint's interactions with the natural world start to make sense.

Mastery of nature as mission strategy

Mayhew-Smith explores three incidents from early insular Christianity, where the new faith comes in for severe criticism and where a natural intervention rebuts the criticism⁵⁶. The first of these comes from Bede's account of the

⁵⁶ Nature rituals op.cit. pp.60 -70

mission of Paulinus to the court of Northumbria. As Paulinus is preaching, a crow started croaking which is heard by the crowd as a negative omen.

Paulinus orders an archer to shoot the bird dead and uses the incident to explain that far from being able to foretell the future, the bird could not foretell its own death. He goes on to argue that shooting the bird was a demonstration of human sovereignty over nature and uses it to illustrate Genesis 1:16.

The second incident comes from Bede's *Life of Saint Cuthbert*, from a time before Cuthbert had taken monastic orders. He is on a riverbank at the entrance to an estuary. A group of monks are floating logs down the river, when the wind gets up, and they begin to drift out to sea. Rather than helping, the onlookers start to jeer the monks, blaming them for the loss of their old religion, and criticizing the new 'which nobody knew how to worship'.

Cuthbert, after failing to persuade the onlookers to help, falls to his knees and prays for the wind to change, which it duly does, bringing the monks safely to shore. The onlookers experience embarrassment and praise Cuthbert and his God for the intervention.

The last example comes from the life of Saint Wilfrid. In West Sussex, an Irish monastery was struggling to convert local people who were unimpressed by the monks teaching on faith and morality, and their resistance was strengthened by the presence of a drought and accompanying famine. St.

Wilfrid puts in an appearance, which triggers an immediate rainfall, after which Saint Wilfrid teaches a different way of fishing, thus solving the famine problem, Saint Wilfrid's evangelism is enhanced because he has demonstrated the usefulness of the faith.

Understanding that dramatic interventions in the natural world are intended to demonstrate restored stewardship over creation forces us to look at some of the other incidents described earlier in a different light. Let's start with Saint Germanus quelling the storm in the channel. It is worth looking not only at what Germanus does, but how he does it.

He began by chiding the storm in the name of Jesus Christ, 'pleading the cause of religion', after which, he sprinkled consecrated oil on the waves, after which the whole company prayed against the storm. If this ritual had been carried out in a church, over an individual, we would know what to call it: an exorcism.

Exorcising water before baptism was not widely done in the Western Church which preferred consecration, but there is one baptism tradition where it is central and that is the baptism rite of Milan advocated by Saint Ambrose. The following is part of an exorcism of water from the Pontifical of Saint Egbert – dated around 766 – and its links with what Saint Germanus did in the channel are obvious:

I exorcise you, creature water, in the name of God the Father Almighty, and in the name of His Son, Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit, so that all the power of the

*adversary and all invasion of the devil, all phantasms and all power of the enemy be eradicated and flee from this creature of water*⁵⁷

And lest we doubt that this was an exorcism, Constantius tells us ‘the enemy of souls was put to flight’.

What Saint Germanus does when confronted with an alarming and dangerous storm, is to exercise his authority as a steward of God’s creation and adapt an existing church ritual and apply it to the disorderly natural world.

And Bishop Germanus is not alone. It is worth noting that in the majority of his encounters with serpents, Samson combines the sign of the cross with words of command, and whilst they may not amount to a full-blown exorcism, they are two key elements of the rite.

If we now turn to Columba, we can see similar patterns: he exorcises a well with a reputation for poisoning people. He exorcises a demon -infested milk pail, and like Germanus stills a storm. But it is not just exorcism that our saints are engaged in. They are also engaged in ritual blessings. Samson blesses a poisoned chalice that becomes harmless; Columba blesses crops so they grow more quickly, water that turns into wine and repeats Moses’ feat of finding water in rock.

As before, the parallels with biblical precedent and earlier saint’s lives are notable, but even given that, what we see is the exercise of stewardship over

⁵⁷ Mayhew – Smith, N and Brush, S *Landscape Liturgies* (Norwich, Canterbury Press, 2021) p.99

the natural world. Earlier I noted that some of these demonstrations seemed to have a missionary element to them. Demonstrating that the one true God, and his servants can impose a degree of order on an unruly world is a very attractive evangelistic approach and seems to have had more success in insular Britain than developing theological and moral arguments.

Finally, saints in the Columban tradition, if not elsewhere, seemed to have consecrated the landscape by a form of ritual bathing based loosely on baptism rites. Most of our evidence comes from the *Lives of Cuthbert* and *Columba*, and they take some unpacking. The best known account is from Bede's *Life of Cuthbert*, which describes the saint entering the sea naked, up to his neck, and standing for hours reciting psalms in harmony with the movement of the waves. Such a consecration mimics the idea of the psalms that have all the created world praising the Creator God. That this is the intent is illustrated by the famous story of the two otters that accompanied Cuthbert out of the water and patted his feet dry⁵⁸.

However, there is an earlier *Life of Cuthbert* written on Lindisfarne, which appears to describe the same practice as Saint Columba. Here, the saint stands in the water up to his loincloth, and maintains a 'crucifix' posture while chanting.

⁵⁸ Mayhew – Smith *Nature Rituals* op.cit p.188

If, the incident described by Bede looks very like the baptism by full immersion practiced by the Roman Church, the Columban practice looks like the baptism rite of Milan which eschewed full immersion in favour of partial immersion with foot washing and consecrated the water after exorcism by placing a cross in the font.

So we have one ritual that seems to celebrate the unity of God's creation, and another that is concerning with exorcising and consecrating potentially dangerous waters. Mayhew-Smith argues that the further north and west you went in the British Isles, and the further you moved away from urban, Roman, culture, the more fearful and dangerous tribal peoples found the natural world, and especially large expanses of water. If missionaries are to successfully baptise people from these cultures, they need first to render the natural world harmless, and they adapted a range of liturgical tools to do just that, taking advantage of the existence of liturgical rites from Milan that seemed well suited – although Augustine in 603, and the Synod of Whitby in 664 required them to conform to Roman practice.,

Influence of Desert Fathers

It seems clear, then that the engagement of the insular churches with the natural world in sometimes dramatic ways is not evidence of a unique common Celtic church with an eco-friendly approach to life, but something rather different. Here were evangelists, monks and hermits trying to operate in a

rural, tribal, society and drawing on a wide range of theological and liturgical resources to do so.

The Christian church in 400 CE was a great deal more diverse than it became as the middle ages unfolded and the papacy in Rome began to develop a monolithic church with a unified doctrine and liturgy. In the collapsing Western Empire there were at least three major centres of ecclesiastical leadership: Rome, Milan, and the so-called Mozarabic culture of Visigothic Spain. As we have already seen, there could be quite striking differences in doctrine and liturgy between the different centres, with Rome and Milan pursuing quite different baptism liturgies.

But the differences between the Western centres were far from being the most important driving forces for liturgical and theological development. As suggested earlier, in our period, much of the original thought came from the Greek-speaking East, up to the appointment of Theodore of Tarsus as Archbishop of Canterbury in 668 CE.

If the vehicle for such developments was, to a large extent, the Eastern monastic movement that came to be known as the Desert Fathers and Desert Mothers, it was because ⁵⁹Eastern monasticism was characterised by extremes of ascetism, intense commitment to prayer and spiritual warfare, combined

⁵⁹ Ward, B *The Desert Fathers: Sayings of the Early Christian Monks* (London, Penguin, 2003)

with high levels of theological study and reflection, although only rarely was this formulated as a formal 'rule' in the Benedictine sense.

At first sight, the links between the insular Church in Britain and the Eastern monastic movement might appear tenuous but are much less so on closer examination. There are three main avenues for such influence. The first was the commercial exchange between the British isles and the Mediterranean world.

The collapse of the Eastern provinces in the British Isles combined with endemic warfare in northern Gaul, reduced cross – Channel traffic, and forced trade and communication links to enter Britain from the west. Recent archaeological discoveries up and down the west coast of Britain have demonstrated thriving links with the Mediterranean world. Where trade leads, ideas follow.

The second link was through pilgrimage⁶⁰. From the days of Egeria onwards, there was a thriving pilgrimage network linking the former Western provinces to Rome, Byzantium and Jerusalem. As an example, central to the Life of Saint Germanus was a pilgrim journey to Ravenna. Networks of pilgrimage thrived throughout the period to the extent that Adomnan of Iona could write a guide

⁶⁰ Ghazarian, J *The Mediterranean Legacy in Early Celtic Christianity* (London, Bennett and Bloom, 2006)

to the Holy Places in Palestine from the personal testimonies of visitors to Iona.

And finally, there was the influence the foothold held by Eastern monastic practice in southern Gaul, where links with East go back to the second century. Irenaeus, Bishop of Lyon had originally come from Smyrna (modern day Izmir), a follower of Polycarp, an early martyr and disciple of the Apostle John. The strength of links between Southern Gaul and Asia Minor became particularly important during the Quartodeciman controversy, with Gallic bishops defending Eastern practices against the wishes of the Pope. When Bishop Colman of Lindisfarne claimed in 664 to be following the 'tradition of John', he may not have been wrong!

The earliest monastery in Southern Gaul was on the island of Lerins and was founded in the fifth century in the same way as Eastern monasticism generally, beginning with a hermit settling, followed by a community developing around him. The monastery of Lerins developed to become a spiritual powerhouse, providing bishops for a number of surrounding dioceses. Whilst the influence of Lerins in mainland Gaul is understandable there were also extensive links with insular Britain. A long tradition links Patrick's training before ordination to Lerins and one abbot of Lerins, Faustus of Riez, was of British birth. But direct movements of peoples was not the major link. Lerins was a theological power house. One of the foremost theologians of the 5th century was Vincent of

Lerins whose ideas were widespread in the Western Empire as a critiques of the developing influence of Augustine, and were popularized by John Cassian whose *Conferences* were widely studied in monastic circles as far north as Iona.

Conclusion

It is safe, therefore, to conclude that the engagement of the insular church with the natural world in often dramatic ways was not an expression of a unique 'Celtic' identity, but rather a creative usage of a wide range of pre-existing theological and liturgical ideas to address the particular challenges faced in extending the Christian faith at a pivotal moment in British history. Whilst insular Christians no doubt enjoyed the natural world as much as anyone else, what was unique was the ability to dig deep into a range of earlier theological, liturgical and monastic practice to address the unique challenge posed to the spread of the faith in Britain.

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