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The Myth of the Celtic Church

Wendy Davies

Despite a considerable volume of scholarly comment to the contrary, notably that of Kathleen Hughes and Jane Stevenson in recent years (1981; 1987), we still quite frequently encounter the belief that there was such a thing as a Celtic Church in the early middle ages. It comes at all levels: serious books bear titles like *The Celtic Church in Britain or Wales or Somerset* (Hardinge 1972; Victory 1977; Porter 1971); undergraduate essays invoke the Celtic Church when they seek to explain the conversion of seventh-century England; respectable radio and television presenters assume it necessary background to give context to this or that place (usually in Ireland); while every tourist who visits a religious site in a Celtic country will be presented with snippets of generalized waffle around the subject, usually heavily larded with anecdotes from the less credible Saints' Lives. It is a very persistent and a very powerful notion.

It is, however, a misleading one. For the third time, therefore, I want to demonstrate its limitations and point the way to some more fruitful approaches. Although I am glad to say that I have modified my views on some aspects of the relevant material since I first wrote about them, I remain committed to the view that there was no such thing as a Celtic Church; the concept is unhelpful, if not positively harmful (Davies, W. 1974-5; Davies and Wormald 1980). That I have modified my views at all is tribute to the excellent work that has been done in the past 15 years and I have therefore tried to cite the best of it in this paper; Kathleen Hughes's work on the early Irish church, however, remains absolutely fundamental to any assessment (1966).

I have said that the Celtic Church idea is unhelpful. More than that, it could be considered positively harmful: if we assume similarities in Celtic countries, we ignore differences and fail to investigate them; we also lack an appreciation of such similarities as did exist in Britain, Ireland and the continent; and we tend to classify the continent as one standardized norm, run from Rome. This certainly was not the case in the earlier middle ages: practice could vary quite significantly in different parts of continental Europe in the sixth or seventh or eighth century,

and — like that of the Spanish church — might be openly hostile to that of Rome; it took many centuries for the church of Rome to establish itself at the pinnacle of a western hierarchy (cf. Mayr-Harting 1972, 174-82). Hence, a fixation with the Celtic Church makes it very difficult to assess the place of Celtic countries in the religious history of Europe as a whole. By insisting on the category, instead of making a statement about the historical past, we say nothing and we lose such opportunities as there are for investigating the dynamic of change.

The Image and its Origins

When people talk or write about a Celtic Church they usually have several images in mind nowadays. They imagine that there were common beliefs, common religious practices, and common religious institutions in Celtic countries, and that these were distinct from beliefs, practice and institutions in England and on the continent. They also imagine that the church in Celtic countries was distinctively saintly and monastic; moreover, it was individual, unorganized and the very opposite of Roman.

Hence we can observe some totally inappropriate associations of the Celtic Church with the Protestant mentality and with the Anglican Settlement of the early modern period. We read of Irish monks as 'the Christian leaven in a rude society, able to implant and preserve Christian culture like a cultivated garden amid a wilderness of disorder' (McNeill 1974, 86). More than this, proponents of the Celtic Church idea are often unclear about period: some suppose it characteristic of the entire pre-Norman early middle ages, from the fifth to the eleventh or twelfth century; others prefer to focus on the earlier centuries, fifth, sixth, seventh and eighth especially. Most lack an interest in the niceties of chronological change: the Celtic Church is focussed in place rather than in time and inhabits a type of religious Otherworld; here the normal rules for handling primary source material lapse, as a word from one source and a sentence from another are taken to apply to all areas and all centuries; we find material from eleventh-century Saints' Lives used to illuminate

sixth-century developments, Irish texts appropriated to apply to Wales or Brittany, and Bede's eighth-century views of seventh-century Celts in Northumbria used to typify all Celts in all centuries (*Hist. Ecc.*, Colgrave and Mynors 1969).

In fact we do have very serious source problems. There is far more from and about Ireland than from other Celtic areas; hence the temptation to make Irish material fit all regions. Material relating to Scotland is exceptionally thin after the eighth century and that relating to Brittany almost non-existent before the ninth; for Wales there are moderate amounts for the south-east but very little for other areas; and Cornwall and the Isle of Man have even thinner coverage. It is not only a problem of unevenness: much of the existing material is difficult to handle and a very high proportion is unprovenanced. Although we might have a generalized idea of its area of production (Ireland, or Brittany, say), we have no idea where precisely and in what context it was produced. Many texts are undated too, and although dates can be suggested, sometimes on strong grounds, this is not the same as working with texts that are clearly located in time and space.

We may ask why this Celtic Church idea is so persistent. It is partly, of course, because those studying seventh-century England are unduly influenced by Bede's preoccupation with the problems arising when different groups of Christians could not agree on the correct day for the celebration of Easter. Although Bede himself is careful to note a range of deviations, and to distinguish between Irish and British (cf. Charles-Edwards 1983), his setpiece conflict at Whitby in 664 has too often been transmitted by English historians as a conflict between 'Celts' and 'Romans'. But this is only part of an answer. More fundamentally, we have to recognize that the Celtic Church is a marketable idea. Denizens of our industrialized world like to believe in the saintly hero and choose to patronize this escape route. It is as suitable a subject for nostalgia about a (non-existent) bygone age as elves and pixies; it complements the twee, folksy, whimsical. This is not so curious as might at first appear. Belief in the Celtic Church has come to be one aspect of the wider belief in the Celt as an 'abnormal visionary being whose mind is fixed ... on the spiritual, the occult, the ideal'; and in the Celtic peoples as 'spiritual, impractical, rural, natural and poetic'. I quote Patrick Sims-Williams, whose Edinburgh O'Donnell

lecture is an elegant study of this 'Visionary Celt' and of the origins of the 'ethnic preconception', which finds its full formulation in the mid-nineteenth century; his analysis of the factors contributing to its formulation is compelling — a complex of the mass psychology of invaders and defenders, of defence strategies, of the pseudo-historical substance behind the German Romantic vision 'preoccupied with an idealized past' (Sims-Williams 1986). Thoughts of a Celtic Church have an earlier origin than this fully developed vision, although they slot nicely into it; they were essentially formulated in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries in justification of the Anglican Settlement; Celtic Christians of the early middle ages were deemed the natural ancestors of the true Protestants of the early modern period, championing simplicity and independence against the tyranny of Rome; in the late eighteenth and nineteenth century it was widely held that Archbishop Ussher (in his paper of 1631) had proved 'that the religion of the Columbans [i.e. the Iona family of monasteries] was for substance the same which the Protestants now profess' (Hay 1927, 76).¹ As such the Celtic Church idea holds a place in the history of *mentalités*: its proper historical context is the complex of religious and intellectual attitudes surrounding the Anglican Settlement. That it has been sustained in an age which, with regional exceptions, is much less concerned about religious affiliations, is very much a consequence of the appeal of the 'Visionary Celt'.

Character

Why should we not speak of a Celtic Church in the early middle ages? No-one who has read the seventh-century or later Lives of St Patrick, or the eleventh-century Life of St Cadog, could sustain the notion of a characteristic withdrawn saintliness; the malevolent power that these saints could and did use, especially through cursing, prohibits it: men were dashed to pieces, the earth swallowed them up, they were consumed by fire, all for thwarting the saints. No-one who has considered the monastic history of eighth- and ninth-century Ireland, with its large, wealthy, powerful communities, with its open warfare between abbots and monasteries, could suppose these men either withdrawn or insistently individual (Hughes, K. 1966, 169–72). No-one who has noted the power of bishops in tenth- and eleventh-century Wales to command the attendance of local clergy and to require lay adherence to their rulings could imagine that all

Celtic churches were unorganized (Davies, W. 1978a, 148–9). No-one who has considered the mission sent to Rome for advice by Irish clerics in the 630s, or noted the characteristic classification of one Irish group as 'Romani' in the seventh- and eighth-century Irish canons, can imagine that all Celtic churches were entirely un-Roman (Hughes, K. 1966, 106–7). Certainly there were *saints*, that is ascetic, withdrawn, holy people; certainly at times there were parties who chose to follow a non-Roman line; certainly there were monks and monasteries. But to suppose these were distinctive and exclusive characteristics is to ignore a good proportion of the clear evidence which does exist and ignore the fact that one could easily find the same characteristics in England and on the continent too. Even a cursory reading of the available evidence is sufficient to dispose of the romantic image.

Institutions

We can be more positive than this. Firstly, it is patently obvious that there was no single institutional structure encompassing the churches of all, or most, Celtic countries at any point in the early middle ages. There was no head of this church; there was no general council; there was no policy-making body regulating church affairs; there was no ruler who might be thought to guarantee orthodoxy, as late Roman and then Byzantine emperors tried to do. Indeed, by contrast, it is perfectly clear that there were *regional* synods within Celtic areas, when bishops met together and made decisions for their regions, or failed to do so. Thus the bishops of eastern Brittany met with the bishops of north-west France, in the province of Tours and elsewhere, during the fifth and sixth and occasionally the seventh centuries (*Conc. Gall.*, A.511, 549, 567, 614, 647–53, de Clercq 1963); the (seven) bishops of the 'neighbouring British province' (wherever that may have been) met Augustine of Canterbury in 603, and failed to agree with him (*Hist. Ecc.*, ii. 2, Colgrave and Mynors 1969); the leaders of the Irish church deliberated together in the 630s, and the southern Irish made an independent decision (*Hist. Ecc.*, iii. 3, Colgrave and Mynors 1969); the leaders of the Welsh church (perhaps the north Welsh church only, since the bishop who effected the change was later localized to Gwynedd) made decisions in 768 for (north ?) Wales (*Ann. Camb.*, Williams ab Ithel 1860). Although some may feel that the Easter problem itself has been

somewhat overrated, there is nothing more telling – and nothing more damaging to the idea of a single Celtic church – than the fact that different regions chose to respond in different ways at different times to the Roman call for standardization of Easter computations: Brittany does not appear to have been deviant in any case and may well have followed the decision of the Frankish Council of Orléans in 541 (*La Borderie* 1898, 264); southern Ireland had conformed by 640; some British in Britain (we do not know where) had done so by 703, although many had still not done so in 731 (*Hist. Ecc.*, v. 15, 23, Colgrave and Mynors 1969); the whole of Ireland had done so by 704, quite probably following the synod of Birr in 697 (*Hist. Ecc.*, v. 15, Colgrave and Mynors 1969; Harrison 1982, 309); Iona, off the west coast of Scotland, and its dependencies (probably in Scotland) did so in 716 as did Pictland (*Hist. Ecc.*, v. 22, 21, Colgrave and Mynors 1969); Wales (or north Wales only) did so in 768 (*Ann. Camb.*, Williams ab Ithel 1860). We have no information about practice in Cornwall or the Isle of Man.

Secondly, far from there being a single church with a single institutional structure, there were institutional differences within and between Celtic regions. Although Celtic churches are churches largely without archbishops and without metropolitan provinces, there are areas in which at times – infrequently and sporadically – there is evidence of honorific *archiepiscopi*; in other words, notable individuals were honoured with a superior title, as a mark of respect without any implication of jurisdiction or hierarchical authority. This happened twice in ninth-century Wales – of Gwynedd and St David's respectively – and several times in relation to St Andrews (*ardepiscop*) in tenth- and eleventh-century Scotland; it may also be implied of Dunkeld in 865 (*primepscop*) (Davies, W. 1982a, 160; Donaldson 1952–3, 110–11). By contrast prominent bishops and their communities at times behaved as if they sought substantial archiepiscopal authority. This is most striking in the case of Armagh in the later seventh century, for a series of documents is witness to claims of appellate jurisdiction throughout Ireland as well as of control of many northern Irish churches; Kildare was in competition with Armagh for control of churches and (following Cogitosus) it looks as if her bishop was prepared to settle for dominance of the southern half of Ireland; however, these attempts were not sustained much beyond 700 (Sharpe 1984a). Similar claims were made in the ninth

century for Dol to serve as metropolitan see for Brittany, with local political backing, although we know little of any powers consistently exercised (Smith, J.M.H. 1982, 67). All three cases arise from particular, local, political and politico-religious circumstances.

Although there were archiepiscopal pretensions in early Ireland and claims in ninth-century and later Brittany, authority in most areas lay with bishops and abbots. Which of the two predominated is a question that has attracted considerable discussion and there is a large literature on Irish aspects of the issue. In some areas powerful abbots acquired the managerial powers which the early Christian church had entrusted to bishops, that is the management of finances and of religious personnel, and they were exempt from episcopal visitation and inspection, whether regular or irregular; bishops performed sacramental functions only.² This was clearly so in the Iona zone of influence (especially in western Scotland) in the late seventh and early eighth century, and was developing in some parts of Ireland during the course of the eighth century (*Hist. Ecc.*, iii. 4, Colgrave and Mynors 1969; Hughes, K. 1966, 68–9). However, this was never the only pattern of authority in Ireland. Moreover, it was demonstrably not the case in Wales, throughout the early middle ages, for bishops clearly retained administrative powers, and powers of visitation, and many exercised them within discrete territories (Davies, W. 1978a, 149–59; Hughes, K. 1981; Davies, W. 1982a, 158–64). Nor was it the case in eastern Brittany in the ninth century, where a clear framework of dioceses allowed for episcopal visitation from time to time (Davies, W. 1988, 25; Guillotel 1979, 255–6). We also know of bishops in the Isle of Man and in Cornwall; although we know rather less about them, at least the Cornish bishop Kenstec, at his 'episcopal seat' in the monastery of *Dinnurrin*, c. 850, and the restoration of the lands of the bishopric of St Germans to Bishop Conan in 936, look focal to the structure of local religious authority (Haddan and Stubbs 1869–71, i, 674; Padel 1978, 26). In Scotland we know of early bishops in the south west and of other bishops in the east and west intermittently throughout the pre-Norman period, with some suggestions of competition between Dunkeld and St Andrews for a type of primacy and some possibility that St Andrews inherited an earlier Abernethy tradition of authority (Donaldson 1952–3). Although evidence is fragmentary, modern scholars argue that most of the twelfth-century bishoprics were

of ancient origin (Duncan 1975, 257–9); the 'ancient' Scottish bishoprics of the twelfth century had connections with widely scattered and intermingled churches and this may perhaps point to yet another pattern of organization in which (at least in central Scotland) episcopal authority was not exercised in discrete territories (Watt 1969; 1975).

As for the complication of monastic bishoprics, it is certainly true that there were many in Celtic areas – bishops whose episcopal households are referred to as monasteries, who themselves were monks and who ruled the 'monastery' as well as their own proper area of jurisdiction: Welsh *Llandeilo Fawr* in the early ninth century, Cornish *Dinnurrin* in the ninth century, Scottish Dunkeld in 865, perhaps Breton Dol until the ninth century, and Irish Armagh until the eighth century, for after 793 there was a tendency for the offices of abbot and bishop to be separate (Davies, W. 1978a, 148, 149–50; Haddan and Stubbs 1869–71, i, 674; Donaldson 1952–3, 109; Gougaud 1922, 100–1; Guillotel 1977; Hughes, K. 1966, 68–9). However, these monastic bishops were hardly distinctive in early Christian history; we find them outside Celtic areas: we can remember St Augustine of Hippo or Pope Gregory the Great, as well as the cathedral monasteries of late Saxon England, for example. Nor were monastic bishops invariably the rule in Celtic areas; monastic and episcopal office were commonly separated in Ireland from the ninth century, often with a lay abbot or coarb distinct from the bishop. Again this underlines the fact that there was a range of possible arrangements.

The monastic federation has also often been seen as characteristic of and distinctive to Celtic churches – associations of monastic houses, sometimes widely scattered, and all more or less subject to the abbot of the mother house or *matrix ecclesiae*. It is true that there were some large federations of monasteries and many small ones: the Iona 'family' of monasteries is the best (and earliest) evidenced but there are others like, for example, the smaller association of monastic houses (and churches) affiliated to Llanancarfan in south Wales (Davies, W. 1978a, 141–2). However, there is little that is distinctive about this: we can find associations of monastic houses in many parts of the continent, where, from the tenth century, the large and scattered federation becomes much more characteristic than it had ever been of Celtic areas. Further, as Richard Sharpe has recently pointed out, the connection between the members of a Celtic federation was

often extremely loose and the powers exercised by the mother abbot often limited or negligible (Sharpe 1984b, 246–7. So too there were varieties of monastic order and different patterns of monastic authority in eleventh- and twelfth-century Europe, where freedom from episcopal interference was highly prized by groupings such as that associated with the monastery of Cluny in Burgundy. Heritability of office and of monastic property was just as common to Europe as to Britain and Ireland: certainly both monastic and non-monastic offices were often heritable in Celtic areas, from the priestships of Breton villages in the ninth century to the stewards of tenth-century monasteries in south Wales to the lay abbots of pre-Conquest Ireland (Davies, W. 1983; Davies, W. 1978a, 128–30; Ó Corráin 1981a, 328–31). But these are features as familiar in eighth-century England or in tenth-century France or Germany as in the Celtic West. There is nothing particularly Celtic about them, although Anglo-Norman reformers of the later eleventh and twelfth centuries sometimes behaved as if there was, since much of the rest of western Europe had already been caught up in the movement for reform of lay and hereditary interests, and of marriage of the clergy; change came later in Celtic areas and there, and there alone, lies the difference.

Practice

We can be as emphatic about differences in practice within Celtic areas as we can about institutional differences. It is true, however, that assessment and classification of the liturgy is difficult, for there is very little useful early evidence from Celtic areas. However, we should remember that there was some diversity in liturgical usage on the continent, at the least between the Roman and the several versions of the Gallican liturgy (Stevenson, J. 1987, xv–xx); while it seems likely that more than one Gallican version of the mass circulated in Ireland (Stevenson, J. 1987, lxvii). If Michael Lapidge is right in suggesting that some Welsh were still using a pre-Gregorian liturgy in the ninth century – and his argument is a strong one – then they clearly clung to a very archaic usage (1986, 93). This serves to emphasize the difference between Welsh and Irish (or at least between some Welsh and some Irish), a distinction of which some Irish were conscious: Irish canons of the early eighth century present the British mass as unacceptably deviant

(Stevenson, J. 1987, lix; *Coll. Can. Hib.*, lii. 6, Wasserschleben 1885).

The evidence about baptism and the consecration of bishops is somewhat similar. Both Bede and the seventh-century penitential of Archbishop Theodore suggest that the British form of baptism was deviant, though not the Irish; we do not know what the deviation was, or indeed if Theodore and Bede really knew that the rite was different, but in any case diversity was common in Europe until the Carolingian pressure for standardization began in the later eighth century (*Hist. Ecc.*, ii. 2, Colgrave and Mynors 1969; Haddan and Stubbs 1869–71, iii, 197; cf. Stevenson, J. 1987, liii–iv). Theodore chose to reconsecrate Bishop Chad because he had originally been consecrated by British bishops; again, we do not know that the rite itself was deviant; Eddius Stephanus commented that Chad had been consecrated by Quartodecimans – those who celebrated Easter on the fourteenth of the Paschal month – and the objection may well have been to the consecrators rather than to the rite of consecration used (*Hist. Ecc.*, iv. 2, Colgrave and Mynors 1969; *Vit. Wilf.*, xiv, Colgrave 1927).³

As for private penance, I will only say that I find it difficult to see any evidence that this habit was characteristic of Celtic churches and transmitted thence (largely by the Irish) to continental Europe, as is commonly supposed. Certainly we have many penitentials of British and of Irish origin; and there is considerable Insular influence in the script of manuscripts of Frankish penitentials of the eighth and ninth century (cf. Pierce, R. 1975, 35); but the penitential texts are not in themselves evidence for private or public performance of the penance. Moreover, it is quite evident that penance was done publicly until the eighth century, at least in Ireland and western Scotland: one seventh- or eighth-century Irish canon makes explicit reference to the public nature of confession – *confessionem peccatorum coram sacerdote et plebe* (Bieler 1963, 164; cf. Bieler 1963, 56: ‘come with witnesses on completion of penance’); and Adomnán details the arrangements made for a penitent who came to Iona and confessed to Columba ‘before all’ and another (a priest) who did so in Meath (*Vita. Columb.*, i. 30, 40, Anderson, A.O. and Anderson, M.O. 1961). The very fact that Irish monasteries had (group) facilities for penitents underlines the public nature of penance undertaken at this period (*Vita Columb.*, i. 30, Anderson, A.O. and Anderson, M.O. 1961; Warren 1881, 148–9). We

have no evidence here of any distinctive Celtic practice, and we must acknowledge that the habit of private confession and penance developed in Britain and Ireland, as on the continent, by some means that remains obscure.

Problems relating to the tonsure are similar to those of baptism and consecration, although we have more specific information to assist our assessment. When Abbot Ceolfrid of Jarrow wrote to King Nechtan of the Picts in the early eighth century, apart from commenting that deviation was not a very serious matter, he pointed out that several types of tonsure had been used in the past and several types were currently in use; however, he thought the crown-like tonsure of Simon Peter was the best (*Hist. Ecc.*, v. 21, Colgrave and Mynors 1969). Tuda from southern Ireland seems to have adopted this most acceptable of tonsures before 664, probably in contrast to British practice for c. 700 some Irish canons noted that the British had the unacceptable tonsure of Simon Magus 'from ear to ear'; other British, according to Bede, had no tonsure at all (*Hist. Ecc.*, iii. 26, Colgrave and Mynors 1969; *Coll. Can. Hib.*, lii. 6, cf. xx. 6, Wasserschleben 1885; *Hist. Ecc.*, v. 22, Colgrave and Mynors 1969; cf. Aldhelm, in Haddan and Stubbs 1869–71, iii, 270). Other Irish, like Colman, seem to have preferred one of the less acceptable tonsures, for he left England in 664 rather than conform; the Iona community – like Nechtan and the Picts – did not move to the crown-like tonsure until the early eighth century (*Hist. Ecc.*, iii. 26, Colgrave and Mynors 1969). For all the complexities of this issue, it is clear that diversity was normal in Europe in the seventh and eighth centuries, and that diversity within Celtic areas is perfectly well evidenced: the British were often seen as deviant, but not all Irish followed the same practice anyway (see James, E. 1984).⁴

It is the trouble over the calculation of Easter dates that has attracted most attention from modern scholars. It was a matter which also often attracted attention in western Europe in the fifth, sixth, seventh and eighth centuries since practice was so varied and could result in embarrassing differences. The problem arose because Easter was determined in relation to the lunar year, which is shorter than the solar year; to overcome the discrepancy, several months were intercalated over a period of years (as we now intercalate one day every four years on 29 February); there were several methods of calculating the intercalation, most of which had some element of inaccuracy. The issues which

concerned Christians included the correct calculation of the vernal equinox, the appropriate point to begin the day (evening or morning), and the appropriate point to begin Easter week (on the 14th or 15th or 16th of the month) as well as the choice of the correct tables for making the annual calculation (Jones, C.W. 1943). Tables based on an 84-year cycle for intercalation were favoured by St Columbanus in the late sixth/early seventh century, a method that had been very common in Europe in the fourth century, and was probably taken to Ireland by British missionaries in the late fourth or fifth century. This was an archaic common standard; with such, it is certainly possible that in the late fourth century and through the fifth century, British and Irish practice was essentially the same. However, although Columbanus stuck to this 84-year cycle – on the grounds that more recent cycles were inaccurate – it is clear that the chronology of the 'Chronicle of Ireland' (the set of annals upon which the early parts of the Annals of Ulster are ultimately based) was partly determined by a 19-year cycle (that of Victorius of Aquitaine) from about 550, and that the superior 19-year tables of Dionysius were used as the foundation of the 'Chronicle' by 606; the Dionysian system was known at Bangor (even if not always used) by 600 (Harrison 1977–8; 1982, 316, 319; 1984). The southern Irish church undoubtedly changed to use a 19-year cycle in the 630s, as separate regions did subsequently seriatim (*Hist. Ecc.*, iii. 26, Colgrave and Mynors 1969; see above); although the Welsh decision to change to the system of Dionysius did not come until 768, some British clerics were using a 19-year Victorian cursus when compiling the *Historia Brittonum* in the late eighth or very early ninth century. This seems to have spanned the fifth and some of the sixth centuries and may have been of Irish origin. That it was used c. 800 is interesting; but there must be a possibility that it was also used in Wales before this (Dumville 1974).

Although much has been made of the polemical comment by Columbanus (*S Columb. Op.*: Ep., ii. 5, Walker 1957) that everyone in the entire western church used the 84-year cycle, and some have supposed that this must have included Bretons as well as Insular Christians, it is patently obvious that 19-year cycles were known and used in some parts of Britain and Ireland in the sixth century. Again, there was diversity. Hence, although it may be reasonable to suppose that British and Irish practice was the same in the fifth and early sixth centuries

(when it was also the same as that in use in parts of the continent), there was clearly increasing diversity of practice in the second half of the sixth century, a diversity which culminated in the open conflicts of the seventh century. It was as a direct consequence of these differences that Tómméne of Armagh launched a mission to Rome in 631 to discover 'the truth'.

We can see, then, that in matters of religious practice not only was there diversity within Celtic churches but a constant tendency for the Welsh to be the most conservative and for a party of the Irish (often southern Irish) to be most closely influenced by Roman practice. Between those two extremes the northern Irish, Iona and western Scotland, and Pictland lagged at various rates behind the southern Irish; what we know of Brittany suggests that it was a curious mixture of conservatism and compliance with Gallic practice as it changed over the early middle ages, although regional differences within Brittany are probably concealed by the very fragmentary pre-ninth-century evidence. In all this we should remember that continental practice was not one standardized whole.

Belief

Just as there is no evidence of one single Celtic practice, neither can we find evidence of any single Celtic doctrine although Bede's History might be thought to suggest that there was an identifiable 'Scottish' doctrine in which Oswald was instructed (*Hist. Ecc.*, iii. 1, Colgrave and Mynors 1969). This *doctrina* means presumably no more than 'teaching' and is far too slight to substantiate any suggestion that Irish doctrine was distinct and amounted to unorthodoxy. Notably, when Columbanus was accused of unorthodoxy in respect of the Easter question, he objected violently and maintained that his belief and teaching were entirely orthodox (*S. Columb. Op.*: Ep. ii. 7, 9; Ep. v. 3, Walker 1957). Leslie Hardinge has made a serious attempt to determine what the Irish believed, by analysing the large corpus of seventh- and eighth-century glosses; interesting as this is, it merely serves to emphasize that the Irish approach to faith was overwhelmingly influenced by the Bible and the fathers (1972, 53–73). On the other hand, there is some reason to argue that the heresy of Pelagianism had a particular and long-lasting influence in parts of Britain and Ireland. Pelagian ideas seem to have been strongly supported in Britain in the fifth century, when Pope Celestine sent Bishop Germanus from

Auxerre to deal with them (Wood 1984, 7–14); in the mid-seventh century Pope John thought Pelagian ideas were reviving sufficiently in Ireland to cause concern, although it has been suggested that he was mistaken (*Hist. Ecc.*, ii. 19, Colgrave and Mynors 1969). In any case, Pelagian approaches can be identified in eighth-century Irish glosses on biblical texts, particularly those in the Würzburg Epistles, and in the Prefaces to the Pauline Epistles in the early ninth-century Book of Armagh; Pelagius is sometimes cited by name — like Patrick and Gildas — as an authority in the Irish canons (*Coll. Can. Hib.*, xxvii. 13; xlii. 4, Wasserschleben 1885); and a Pelagian commentary was copied in Wales in the late seventh or early eighth century (Dumville 1985b). I do not think we should see this Pelagian influence as consistent or standard or overwhelming (Bede, who loathed Pelagianism, did not usually regard the Irish as heretics); however, the ideas had a long life, on both sides of the Irish Sea.⁵

Some Similarities

It is not difficult, therefore, to find material that demonstrates regional differences between Celtic areas in religious affairs in the early middle ages, such that any notion of a single Celtic Church is easily disposed of. These points are obvious; they are not controversial; they do not need defending; they simply need noting by a wider readership than the relatively small company of scholars that knows them well.

There clearly was no single Church, as such. However, if we reformulate the question to ask when, where and in what circumstances were Celtic churches similar, then there are some interesting things to say. I have already pointed out the interest in Pelagian ideas manifest on both sides of the Irish sea in the seventh and eighth centuries. This is but one indication of the fact that there was in many respects a shared Latin culture for several centuries in Wales, Cornwall, Ireland and to some extent Brittany: clerics and monks were studying the same Latin works, using the same terms, thinking within the same conceptual framework, and using similar biblical texts, related to the older *Vetus Latina* rather than the Vulgate (Lapidge 1986, 91–2, 98, 102; Stevenson, J. 1987, lxxv–vi). They studied within the framework of a learning that was biblical and patristic rather than classical, a learning sometimes strongly influenced by the late classical grammatical tradition (James, E. 1982; 1984; Contreni 1986). Their approach to

ecclesiastical status and to the place of the church in politics and society was heavily influenced by the Old Testament and by Mosaic Law in particular (Fournier 1909; Ó Corráin, Breatnach and Breen 1984, 394; cf. Hardinge 1972, 49–50). This is much better evidenced in Ireland than in other areas but the sporadic occurrence of distinctive terms in Welsh and Cornish texts shows how widespread was the approach (Enright 1985, 94). For example, we find the word *princeps*, 'prince, ruler', used to mean 'abbot' in Ireland, Scotland, Wales and perhaps Cornwall; this is not just an unusual word, but one which emphasizes the abbot's powers of control – he who holds the *principatus* (Davies, W. 1982c, 83–5; Dumville 1985a, 71–4). We find the word *refugium* used for sanctuary, in its territorially expanded western sense of a specially protected zone where special penalties applied for infringements, taken from Leviticus 'civitates refugii'; this is an Old Testament usage, but a usage not taken up on the continent, although immunities as such were common enough (Pryce 1984, 2). Huw Pryce can therefore postulate that there was a text of the Irish collection of canons available at an ecclesiastical centre in Wales in the early middle ages, a text which came to influence the much later material of the secular Welsh law tracts (Pryce 1986, 122–7). The evidence for Brittany in this respect is not quite so strong, but there are characteristically 'hispanic' stylistic touches in the Breton Saints' Lives (cf. Wood 1988, 382); grammatical texts and Gospels were copied in the ninth century (Dumville's valuable Oxford O'Donnell Lectures 1978, as yet unpublished; Guillotel 1985); and many Irish manuscripts were copied in the latter part of that century.

The Latin culture of Celtic areas for a time also influenced the record-making tradition of most parts in respect of property transactions: western charter forms are odd, although a derivative of late Roman forms, and do not change over time in the way that continental charter forms do. We find the distinctive western form in Wales and western Brittany especially, up to the eleventh century; in Cornwall in the tenth century; sufficient traces in Scotland to imply the same from seventh to twelfth century; few in Ireland, but enough seventh-century fragments and quotations in Saints' Lives to indicate that the forms were received, tried, had a limited influence, but did not attract wide usage (Davies, W. 1982b). More generally successful was the Insular system of scripts; again late Roman in origin, if we follow Julian

Brown's analysis, it was transmitted to Ireland and thence back to Britain and England (Brown 1984). There were regional variations, of course, but Insular scripts were normal in Insular countries and Brittany until the latter – the first to abandon them – moved to caroline minuscule in the early ninth century (Guillotel 1985, 17, 36; cf. Dumville, O'Donnell Lectures 1978).⁶ Despite the overweighing of the Irish evidence, we cannot ignore the fact that we find common material in the written traditions (as also in the tradition of writing) again and again in Ireland, Wales, Brittany and Cornwall. This does not make for a Celtic Church, but it does argue for a common pool of literary tradition and some sustained contact as it developed. In this Scotland is a problem; after Adomnán in the early eighth century we have so few sustained texts that we simply do not know about the literary culture, Latin or vernacular, of the area (cf. Hughes, K. 1980).

I would raise another possible similarity, an institutional one, to consider. There seem to me to be some indications – rather tenuous – that in Ireland, Wales, Cornwall, Brittany and possibly Scotland (again the subject is bedevilled by the paucity of Scottish material) institutions for the pastoral care of the laity were more developed than in many other parts of Europe before the tenth century. A case for the existence of a rural proto-parochial structure can be made at an unusually early date for some Celtic areas. Whereas in most of continental Europe it was the tenth, eleventh and twelfth centuries which was the period that saw the real implementation of the parish structure in the countryside, whatever earlier clerics and rulers may have wished, it is perfectly clear, from very good evidence, that the geographical framework of the later structure as well as the provision of priests for local village communities was solidly (and possibly anciently) established in eastern Brittany by the early ninth century (Davies, W. 1983). On the basis of much more tenuous – but extremely suggestive – evidence discovered by Lynette Olson and Oliver Padel, the same may be suggested for parts of Cornwall by the tenth century (1986). On the basis of the very large number of churches in south-east Wales by the eleventh century one might be tempted to argue the same, although we know nothing of the role of these churches in relation to their local communities (Davies, W. 1982a, 143–4); at least the early development of distinctive, small-scale, local cults suggests plenty of lay participation in religious experience (Davies, W. 1978a, 131–2). If Ann

Preston-Jones's argument for the early development of local cults in Cornwall be accepted, then the same may be said of Cornwall too (see Preston-Jones below). The several seventh- and eighth-century texts from Ireland (*Riagail Phátraic*, *Córus Bésnai*, and several Latin canons) make it quite clear that some group(s) in Ireland was trying to ensure that baptism and burial services were performed for at least some of the laity, through episcopal agencies, and tithes duly collected (Ó Corráin, Breatnach and Breen 1984, 408–9; Sharpe 1984b, 252, 259–60).⁷ This material is prescriptive, and is what you might expect a good bishop to attempt; as such it is comparable with the Carolingian legislation on the subject and, like the Carolingian case, there is no especial reason to suppose that the prescriptions were invariably carried out (McKitterick 1977; Lemaignier 1982). However, these prescriptions do find expression at a surprisingly early date, and there was certainly no shortage of churches in seventh-century Ireland and no shortage of local cult by 800 (Sharpe 1984b, 254; cf. Doherty 1984a, 306). There may be a contrary suggestion for Scotland before the mid-twelfth century; before that large minsters are believed to have served very large areas, with priests travelling out to the localities from a central base (cf. Duncan 1975, 297–9).⁸ Scotland notwithstanding, it is worth considering and pursuing the rest. If it is worth considering and pursuing the rest, true it would not in some senses be surprising: Christianity in Celtic countries was necessarily rural; if there was to be any provision of pastoral care at all, it had to be rural-based; rural institutions would have to have been developed *ab initio* (cf. Sharpe 1984c, 201).

Change over Time

We might in the end draw some chronological distinctions. In the fifth and early sixth centuries, when there was British missionary work in Ireland and Scotland, and quite possibly in Brittany too, institutions and practice are likely to have been very similar in all areas. There are likely to have been some bishops, plenty of priests, not so many monasteries, the use of the 84-year cycle for calculating the date of Easter, late Roman modes of property registration, the use of scripts derived from late Roman 'expert' cursives, and so on. As Plummer pointed out nearly a hundred years ago, Britain perpetuated archaic continental practice (1896, ii, 354). In the later sixth and very early seventh centuries, by contrast, we have evidence of

change within the Irish church: monasteries were founded, sometimes many; ascetic principles were adopted by many and became influential; the *peregrinationes*, long-ranging journeys to England and the continent, began (Hughes, K. 1966). In short, despite the continuing influence of British masters like Gildas and Finnian/Uinniau in the Irish church (Dumville 1984c; 1984d), and despite continuing respect for their authority, the conditions for diversity were being established, although the written Latin culture seems to have remained conservative. In the course of the seventh century, religious differences between Britain and Ireland became very clear, as did differences within Ireland too; some clerics developed a greater awareness of 'Rome', and hence of contrasts in custom and practice; some communities and their leaders developed ambitions of establishing themselves at the pinnacle of hierarchical authority; some lay families developed close relations with particular monastic communities. By the eighth century regional characteristics were obvious, and the British/Irish divide was apparent and often noticed. At various times in the next three centuries the different regions changed from these deviant patterns – Brittany began to change in the ninth century, Wales in the late tenth and eleventh, Ireland and Scotland in the mid- and later eleventh century. But by the late eleventh century, whatever the outset, and whatever the recent change, all looked deviant to the leaders of the newly reformed western church – deviant because they were only slightly touched by continental reform (just as the Anglo-Saxon church looked deviant to the Anglo-Norman historians of the early twelfth century). The notion of 'Celtic Church', therefore, is most appropriate to the fifth and early sixth century, although the church in Celtic areas was not so different from the continent at that period.⁹ By contrast, the late eleventh century was a period when the otherness of the Celtic churches became a concern of many western observers.

We might also take note that our perceptions of the Celtic Church issue are confused by the tension between the shared Latin culture of many of those churches in the sixth, seventh and eighth centuries and the differing social consequences of conversion in those areas. There are times when elements of the clergy were thinking the same thoughts and doing the same things, but the local experience of Christianity varied. Thus the impact of Christianity on, for example, the status of women

varied: whereas Irish women accepted the call to chastity, adopted the committed Christian life and achieved sanctity in large numbers by 800, Breton women do not appear to have done so — we find no Breton nuns nor Breton female saints in this period. So also the impact of monasticism on men varied: whereas Irish men responded to the call to ascetic principles by picking up their bags and walking, Britons and Bretons and Scots seem to have been much less mobile; this was not entirely so, but it is the Irish who developed a quite remarkable mobility. It may also be true that whereas Welsh, Cornish and Bretons harboured their slaves, Irish and Scots were more stimulated to give slaves their freedom, at least by accepting them into religious institutions and making manumission an acceptable penance in recompense for sins.

So, in a conference where the emphasis is on the archaeology of Welsh Christianity, do not be misled by the Celtic Church model: you are not likely to find many traces of shared Latin culture on the ground, nor — if it is appropriate — of parishes. Do not expect that everything will or should look Irish, although some things might; do not expect that everything will look monastic, and/or eremitic; do expect Welsh things to tend to be archaic; and think very carefully about burial, as yet the largest corpus of unexploited material that we have (see H. James below). We may even, in time and with a good series of dates, be able to relate this material to parochial development. If that happens, we really will have a breakthrough, as much in European as in Celtic history.¹⁰

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Notes

1. I am grateful to Wyn Evans for drawing this refreshingly vigorous work to my attention.
2. Sharpe argues that bishops retained responsibility for pastoral care in these cases; this is possible — and an interesting proposal —

but the available evidence is not decisive (1984b, 258–61).

3. Jane Stevenson also points out that the anointing of priests was not a Roman custom, but it was Gallican (1987, lvi).
4. The monks of Landévennec in western Brittany still had a tonsure which the Carolingians found deviant in the early ninth century, called 'Irish' by Louis the Pious (*Vita Winwal.* ii, 13, in de La Borderie 1888). I do not think we need suppose this was necessarily Irish — it may merely have been classified as such in the flurry of 'Iromania' (see James, E. 1982, 380).
5. It is possible that the Irish Romani had some different interpretation of the psalms, if a (?) Northumbrian text of c. 700 is to be believed (Ó Cróinín 1982, 285).
6. Cf. orthographic similarities too, although the debate on whether the distinctive practices have a British or an Irish origin still rages (Harvey 1989, and references there cited). Patrick McGurk has demonstrated that, although there was a distinctive *Irish* bookmaking tradition, there is not enough evidence to say that it was distinctively *Celtic* (1987).
7. There is a problem over the intended beneficiaries of these services; *Riagail Phátraic* suggests that they are only intended for *manaig*, monastic tenants; Ó Corráin's reading of *Córus Béscnai*, however, clearly indicates the entire lay population, whether monastic tenants or otherwise (Ó Corráin, Breatnach and Breen 1984, 408–9; but cf. Ó Corráin 1981a, 334).
8. Charles Thomas argued that the church of Ardwall Island, off south-west Scotland, served the local population, although there is no direct evidence for this (1967c, 174); and suggested that the *kirks* of south-west Scotland represented ancient parish foci — again possible, but we lack any direct evidence (Thomas 1967c, 181).
9. Richard Sharpe would argue that the similarities were more noticeable than the differences in the late sixth century (1984c, 201–2); this may have been so, although at present I am more inclined to note the range of Easter tables in use in the late sixth century than to believe that the influence of British masters in Ireland necessarily made for homogeneity/standardization.
10. Grateful thanks are due to Patrick Wormald for his comments on the written draft of this paper.