

Problems & Application of Celtic Thought

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Those who today seem to find something in the old ways of the Celts, whether druidic or Christian, often seem to cast it in an “us-them” milieu, pitting Celtic spirituality and thought against Roman Catholicism, especially Augustinian theology, and Greco-Roman philosophy. This not only goes against the grain of ancient Celtic thought - the ancient Celts had a great love of knowledge and truth, wherever it was found -- but also is flat out wrong, and speaks to a general ignorance at best, or a outright misrepresentation at worst of Celtic thought. Alongside of this is the inherent danger of any faddism, that of romanticizing, with some sort of nostalgic notion, the idea with little regard to any negatives that might be found within the thought. We paint the ancient Celts as some sort of super hero who had it all together in how they thought about Creation, women, family, or whatever it is that we are promoting. We willfully overlook the fact that even though the ancient Celts, celebrated the belief that they were “Children of the Creator God,” they were also human and often screwed up, not always living according to their myth, or for that matter, even interpreting their myth correctly.

Quite frankly, Celtic thought, or at least as it was interpreted, has contributed to society’s ills as strongly as has Roman Christianity or Greco-Roman thought. And likewise, Roman Christianity and Greco-Roman thought has contributed just as much as Celtic thought to society’s well being. To claim anything else is arrogant on our part. To understand the good and bad of it all we must go back to the medieval period when Celtic thought as advanced by the Celtic-Latins and Arthurian saga was being synthesized along with several other schools of philosophies, Christian and “pagan,” into what became the Enlightenment. The outcome of the synthesis was that parts of Celtic thought (as with competing philosophies) were incorporated, while other parts, integral to the wholeness of the thought, were left behind. How the various schools of philosophy melded together and subsequent interpretation, and the consequences of such interpretation, can be seen both in the goodness of our world as well as in her fragmentation.

Let me give you some examples, although by necessity of space somewhat simplistic, from history of partial integration of Celtic thought. Our examples are not drawn from the Middle Ages, but from subsequent eras where the medieval synthesis took root and flourished.

1. The fathers of modern psychology, Freud and Jung, both drew upon Celtic thought for their formulation of the psychological nature of humans. Freud drew primarily from the masculine aspect of Celtic spirituality and became sexually oriented. Jung, in reaction to Freud, drew primarily from the feminine aspect and developed the concept of the “shadow side.” Both drew from only part. Celtic thought is not built upon masculine-feminine contrast, but rather feminine-masculine wholeness. In Celtic thought there is no masculine-feminine dichotomy, nor is the universe thought of in sexual terms in the way that Freud does. Jung’s light-dark dichotomy is also contrary

to Celtic thought, which has no dualities, no dichotomies. Both views, because they are only half there have led to individualistic narcissism and the sense of entitlement.

2. The father of the Utopian idea, Thomas More, and subsequently, the Father of Communism, Karl Marx, both drew upon Irish/Celtic sociology to develop their respective systems. More's Utopia led to such societies as the Amanda and Aurora Communities, and circuitously to the Arts and Crafts movement. We know where Marx's version of Utopia ended up. The failure of More was that he emphasized the community good against individual need, while Marx in his interpretation managed to do away with both the individual and the community in favor of the state, which upon collectively gaining power from the masses, negated the individual into "nothingness" other than a machine for the good of the state.

3. The Republican and Democratic ideas of Rousseau, Montesquieu, John Stuart Mill, Jefferson, Franklin, also draw heavily upon Celtic ideas, especially as advanced by John of Salisbury in the 11th century. Only in doing so, they emphasized the rights of the populous while ignoring the rights of Creation, both of which were covered in Irish Brehon. What else was missed was Celtic emphasis on the community rather than the individual being the basic unit of social life. Only Rousseau got this right, but he did miss the "Creation" aspect.

4. Hildegard of Bingen, the Rhine Mystics, including Meister Eckhart, drawing heavily from the Celtic heritage of the region as well as from the teachings of the wandering Irish missionary-monks following the Dark Ages provide us with an unique school of Christian mysticism. Unfortunately in doing so they often missed or relegated to second tier status the Celtic emphasis that mysticism yields active stewardship. Celtic Christianity taught that any mysticism that does not translate into active stewardship, that is the giving and receiving of blessing through deed, is useless mysticism.

These are but a few of the many illustrations that might be presented of impartial integration of Celtic thought and its affect upon contemporary society. They all reflect a need for further research, study and expansion. But for our purposes they make the point of what may happen when any thought is dissected and only the "appropriate parts" applied. While our examples are of impartial application, such application does suggest that Celtic thought, if wholly rather than partially integrated into contemporary society, might have something of value to offer. Let me suggest some specific disciplines along with general ideas for application within that discipline. Keep in mind that a "whole integration" requires that we first realize where such thought was partially integrated and then come to understand how that has affected society. While I am suggesting "whole integration" of Celtic thought, we must be willing to accept that in certain instances partial integration may indeed have a more positive affect than whole integration. Whether we integrate wholly or partially still requires that we first understand how specific areas of Celtic thought were synthesized during the medieval period and how that synthesis affects us today.

1. Legal thought: Brehon Law (Irish legal system) is about rehabilitation, not punishment. It is about building esteem.

As Brehon law was originally rooted in the druidism, and then Celtic Christianity, the legal system was essentially about spirituality and wholeness/holiness - not regulating holiness, but creating holiness/wholeness. The Senchas Mór, “the Water Song” derives its title from the great primordial Celtic myth of creation, the Oran Mór. Rehabilitation is then about helping an individual, or community, experience their intrinsic holiness.

2. Political Systems: Irish (Celtic) political systems drew their power from (1) the people, and (2) the land rather than imposing their power upon the people.

A king ruled not by his own power, but because the people empowered him to do so. He remained in power only if the land confirmed his right to rule, i.e., he justly exercised his role as steward. The Irish political system was an inverted triangle with the king upholding the people having derived his power from them, rather than the king suppressing the people with his power. The proper function of king toward the people was that of shepherd. The rightful king did not set people against people to establish his power. (This applied also to the religious system, whether druidic or Christian, and I think it can also apply to our modern business systems.)

Perhaps a reemphasis on this thinking would go along way toward creating a lasting peace in Northern Ireland.

3. Religious Practice: The practice of Celtic spirituality, either in the Old Way, or as Christians, was mystical and not dogmatic.

We create our belief system from how we experience God rather than experiencing God according to someone else’s dogma, be that Church or priest. Such a belief celebrates the wondrous diversity of worshipping God rather than setting up conflict. Again something that should be reemphasized in Northern Ireland.

Mystical religion as practiced in both the Old Way and Celtic Christianity was wholly integrated with practical everyday living, that is, one’s mystical experience must be actively shared, not primarily in word, but in deed - the giving of blessing (social justice, hospitality, etc.). There was no sacred-secular dichotomy. Everything was holy, although holiness could certainly be profaned. (as does all war and conflict - or even doing nothing when we know to do something)

The druid and the Christian priest were not the mediators between God and humans/nature but the prophets of God’s Word (i.e., the Oran Mór). To be a prophet is not the same as being a theologian, which is about developing systems, or dogmas.

4. Systems Theory:

All Celtic systems were based on community good, not individual advancement, nevertheless the community, as shown in the Brehon law was as equally concerned about individual needs as it was about community needs.

Order and creativity flowed within chaos. Chaos did not need to be removed to find order and creativity. In fact to do so, was to destroy creativity and order.

5. Scientific thinking:

In Celtic spirituality science and faith were closely integrated, one contributing to the strength of the other. In due time (medieval period), at the insistence of science in reaction to the dogmatics of religion, science and religion separated into separate disciplines. Today science is once again “finding,” or confirming, religion as an integral part of science. Yet organized religion steeped in dogmatics is about to be left out once again. As a noted scientist recently said, “Now that we’re (science) is saying ‘we’re back,’ religion is saying, ‘go away.’” He goes on to add, “I think that perhaps the Native Americans and those ancient Celtic people had it right when they said that both science and religion are the same, they’re both about faith and experiencing God.”

The ancient Celt’s concept of time was primarily, “Templum” (the word from which we get “temple”) rather than “Tempus” (from which we get “tempest,” as in turbulent or chaotic). For the Celt all time was present in the moment - the Hebrew idea of Sabbath. Not time standing still, but all time - past, present & future - absorbed in the instant of experience. Time is experienced as eternal. Science is now saying exactly the same thing. (The Greeks called it “Karios” and “Chronos.”)

Further for the Celts, if time was Templum, then the boundaries of place cease to exist. When science recently captured light and made it “stand still,” they also demonstrated, at least mathematically, that a particle can be in two places at one time, or that same particle can be in two timeframes at one place.

Back to “Templum” and “Tempus”— Ironically contemporary culture has reversed the Celtic concept. For the ancient Celts, Templum time is what gave Chaos order and creativity. For modern culture, it is Tempus, temporal, time that creates chaos. Because we live according to the clock life appears chaotic, and we fail to realize that it is in the chaos that we find order.

5. Economic Systems:

We can apply this idea to business. Business is prone to want to remove the chaos - usually caused by greed (which is a result of living in the temporal) - and then seek to create order. Chaos Theory, which the Celts understood quite well and celebrated too, teaches that order (and thus profitability) is found in the chaos.

Celtic spirituality, I believe, provides the perfect crucible for Western people with which to examine our world and find meaning. We can never be Asians or Native Americans, unless we have that blood in us, but almost of us who claim to be European have a bit of “Celtic” in us

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