

## Redemption Through Pilgrimage

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2000

*May the Son of God be at the outset of my journey,  
May the Son of God be in surety to aid me;  
May the Son of God make clear my way,  
May the Son of God be at the end of my seeking.*

Celtic Christianity can be summed up in two words: *death* and *resurrection*. These are not “either, or” or “both, and” phrases. They are simply the same experience from two perspectives. Both build upon the constant Celtic theme: “redemption through travel – reconciliation as the result of pilgrimage,” beginning and ending, commingled.

Narratologists, one who studies the narrative, suggest that there are only three basic story types: that of contact and broken contact, that of a task, or goal, to be reached, and that of departure and return; in Greek literature, Helen of Troy, the Trojan War, and the complete Odyssey, respectively. The Celtic pilgrimage is not about contact and broken contact, yet it is. Nor is it about a goal to be reached, although the “place of resurrection” is the quest of the pilgrimage. It is, however, about departure and return. Death and resurrection – mystical experiences indeed – transform the *tarus*, or journey, into *pergrinatio*, pilgrimage. In the words of the Irish mystic, T. S. Eliot, “We shall not cease from exploration and the end of all our exploring will be to arrive where we started and know the place for the first time.” The story – the pilgrimage – is the authority, not the words, not the “facts.” Celtic Christianity is the story of sacramentally experiencing the mundane.

Celtic Christianity is driven by that gnawing discontent known to the Welsh as *taiſchwant*, the overwhelming desire to experience on earth *Tir Na n’ Og*, our mystical home, in both mind and body. Hence, Celtic myth and legend is resplendent with *immrama*, Wonder Voyages, and Christian monks who relentlessly wander the face of the earth as the “wind of God blows.” Here is a homesickness – a mystical sort of thing – that pulls us, first one way to those places of resurrection, then equally the other way to our place of birth; always through *poustina*, the wilderness, where all is seemingly dead or dying. *Hiraeth*, the Welsh call it, and it is *hiraeth* coupled with *taiſchwant* that makes Celtic Christianity unique among all Christianities. It is *hiraeth* and *taiſchwant* that brings rise out of the *poustina* ecstatic mysticism. Known as *gorfoleddu* by eighteenth century Welsh Methodists, it comes with all true spiritual revival, revival that while in the midst of death and resurrection, can only be fully experienced in the mundane of everyday life. Celtic Christianity did not teach that *gorfoleddu* was a heavenly potential. Always practical, Celtic Christians knew that God can only be fully experienced in the here and now. Yet, in this here and now experience, *Tir Na n’ Og* is achieved.

This is Celtic Christianity! It may be said, and certainly the Celtic Christian recognized it, the Celtic Christian experience – the *pergrinatio*, is the wilderness experience of the Hebrew Children. It is the agony and glory of Christ upon the cross. It is the life and death of everyday living in a hostile world. And as such, has much to offer our modern experience of seemingly endless spiritual death.

*ym brin in tyno. In inysset mor  
im pop fort it elher  
rac crist guin nid oes inialet*

*On the hill, in the valley, in the islands of the sea,  
everywhere you may go,  
before blessed Christ there is no desert place.*

As in this verse from *Llyfr Du Caerfyrddinor*, for the Celtic Christian, even while in the desert, there is always spiritual resurrection, death and Life comingled. The spiritual loneliness of the desert place is transformed by the living presence of Christ, the *Logos*, the Great Song of creation. And herein, lies another great truth of Celtic Christianity. It is the Creative Song – known to the Celts as Oran Mór, “The Great Song,” that is both the *Taithchwant* and the *hiraeth*. And it is the Oran Mór that gives rise to, and is, *gorfoleddu*. The language of creation is the mystical language of Celtic Christianity.

*All around me the most beautiful music plays;  
the song of birds,  
the lowing of cattle,  
the leaves rustling in the wind,  
the cascade of the river.  
No king could hire such music with gold;  
it is the music of Christ himself,  
given freely.*

Celtic Christianity flows not from dogma imposed by the Church, but from freely experiencing the mystical language of Christ— *taithchwant* and *hiraeth*, the deaths and resurrection of everyday life.

*The sunlight did not penetrate through the hall's romantic windows  
onto the ecstasy of the dandified feast...*

*But Herlyn opened the obstinate door: and we heard the cry of the  
country in its pain, the red barking of the industrial dust, and saw the  
bread, the wine, and the cross.*

These words of Welsh poet, David Gwenalt Jones, from his monumental work, ‘*Y Drws (The Door)*’ say it so well, Celtic Christianity not only flows from

pilgrimage, it also flows *within* the pilgrimage herself, within the death and resurrection of everyday life, of Creation herself.

The Welsh bard Taliesin rightly claimed that never was there a time that Christianity was not among the Celts. For to understand Celtic Christianity's mystical nature we must begin before the beginning; way before the coming of Christianity, way before there was even an earth. There is an insightful tale that the seventeenth century French priest, Christophe de Vega, included in his *Life of St. Anne*, who it is said was a Breton Celt.

*In the beginning God created the Joachim and Anne (heaven and earth). And the Anne was barren (without form and void). And darkness (affliction and confusion) was upon the face of Anne (the deep), and the Spirit of God moved upon the face of waters (Anne's tears) to consol her. And God said, 'Let there be light ... and the gathering of the graces (Anne's tears) he called maria ("seas" or "Mary").*

Father de Vega clearly equates St. Anne with *Anu (Danu)*, the primordial Celtic mother goddess. In doing so, he reminds us that for the Celts, it all began when the primordial breath of God moved across the waters and from the Quiet arose the "Great Song" – the Creative Melody – the Oran Mór.

*Quiet—  
Eternal Quiet. Not even the sound of the restless, stirring dark waters could be heard...*

*Then, a great spiraling strain of Melody moved across the endless waters. Subdued at first, then quickly gathering momentum until she reached a great crescendo.*

*And, then, there was Life!*

*But the melody did not stop. She continued to sing, filling all of Creation with her divine harmony. And so she continues today, for all those who listen.*

For the ancient Celts the Creative Melody was the primordial God's love song, a song of divine parentage, an invitation to divine friendship and an offer of divine hospitality, a banquet of blessing. It is no wonder that Caesar claimed that the Celts believed that they were descended from the gods— "The Children of God," the ancient Celts called themselves. Is this not the same claim that Christians make? Does not, St. John the Apostle, the most beloved of all Gospel writers for Celtic Christians, says just this: "How great is the love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God (1 Jn. 3:1 NIV)."

From the time when the Celts became “The Celts,” a Roman designation of a group of peoples originating in the central Danube-Hartz Mountain region, as far as we can tell, they held to the belief that they were indeed descendent from the gods. And contrary to what is generally supposed, the ancient Celts did not worship the creatures of Creation, but rather a tripartite God who “charged” Creation with the numinous image. One aspect of the tripartite God was the Christ-like Child-Advocate. The Continental Celts knew him as Cernunnos, the Green Man of our gardens. Celtic Christianity, then, is not a replacement of the Old Way, nor is it a synthesis of pagan and Christian thought, or an adaptation of the “best” of the pagan Old Way into Christianity. Celtic Christianity is rather, a genuine continuation of the Old Way in a form that readily infuses the whole of one into the whole of the other without doing disservice to either. As such, the Celts produced their unique brand of Christianity.

To make Celtic Christianity a replacement does a disservice to the reality of Celtic myth. To synergize the Old Way with Christianity leaves us with something that is unrecognizable as either, and worse may give rise to that which is no more than a brief fad or some sort of romanticized Celtic nostalgia. Lastly, to adapt the Old Way to Christianity demythologizes the myth, leaving us with sterile facts devoid of reality. Adaptation always leads to romanticizing that which is being adapted and is fraught with the possibility of misuse. For who determines what is to be adapted or discarded? Or, for that matter, how it is to be adapted, and by what criteria? Unfortunately this is what we find in much of what is called “Celtic Christianity” today.

When we explore Celtic Christianity we have difficulty in avoiding the filters of preconceived logic and dogma, filters that have become so much a part of our “seeing” that we, like the proverbial absentminded professor, forget that they’re even there. If we look at Celtic Christianity through the filters of Augustinian theology, or Aristotelian logic, for example, we either find her too infused with paganism to be of any real value, or we romanticize her to “fit in.” Either way, Celtic Christianity becomes something she is not.

Or perhaps, as we are often wont to do when our comfortable status quo is shaken by the new, we fear Celtic Christianity and the challenges – changes – she demands of us, as did the medieval Roman Church. Here I cannot help but be reminded of John Donne’s “An Anatomy of the World:”

*And new philosophy calls all in doubt,  
The element of fire is quite put out;  
The sun is lost, and th’ earth, and no man’s wit  
Can well direct him where to look for it...  
’Tis all in pieces, all coherence gone;  
All just supply, and all relation:  
Prince, subject, Father, Son, are things forgot.*

To embrace something new, much is at stake, and we resort, as did Arthur's knights, to chasing imaginary beasts through self-contained forests.

In our exploration of Celtic Christianity we will make an honest attempt to stop hunting beasts of our imagination, to leave our self-contained forests of theology and philosophy, and to discover for ourselves Celtic Christianity. To discover the legacy that Celtic Christianity gave to us – a legacy charged with both the Wonder of nature and inherent divine friendship, a legacy built not upon original sin, but original blessing. We will seek to learn for ourselves how beginnings and endings, deaths and resurrections, commingle in the mundane and bring about holy wholeness, and we will seek to learn how to practice and experience the holy wholeness of Celtic Christianity in the here and now. And in so doing, experience with Celtic Christian everywhere, the *taithchwant* and *hiraeth* of *gorfoleddu*.

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