

SPIRITUALITY AND CULTURE: THE CASE OF CELTIC CHRISTIANITY

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We have seen a tendency in Christian circles in recent years for the theme of spirituality and culture to be increasingly drawn together. For the ethnic minorities of modern Britain, culture and religion can seem contiguous, with the one supporting the other, while, for the Christian, culture often seems to carry the values of secular humanism and to lie precariously within the contested zone of social and national ideals. Within such a context, it makes sense for the Christian churches to engage with secularism not only by showing the extent to which even modern European culture is in fact indebted to the Christian tradition but also by remaining alert to the possibilities of dialogue between culture and Christianity in the interests of evangelisation and inculturation, when an unadulterated critique can seem too trenchant.¹ At this point, however, I want to register a certain discomfort at the ease with which spirituality and culture are at times aligned in the academic world, in the belief that the juxtaposition of spirituality and culture is one which is in fact deeply problematic.

I wish to begin however by pointing firstly to what the two terms actually have in common, noting for instance that 'spirituality' and 'culture', both of which are common words in our society, generally lack a precise signification. The term 'spirituality' may be used in a specifically Christian context, or indeed it may appear in a world religions' context (with quite diverse and possibly mutually exclusive presuppositions concerning theology and self) and even at times outside any traditional religious context at all. Thus it seems to enjoy meanings which range from an approximation to the Christian ascetical theology of yore, on the one hand, to a general religiosity on the other, which may be set entirely outside the boundaries of any formal religion and be characterised only by a belief in the supernatural and an opposition to materialism. In the case of the word 'culture', we can follow Raymond Williams by noting a fundamental distinction between culture as "an informing spirit" which "is manifest over the whole range of social activities but is most evident in 'specifically cultural' activities – a language, styles of art, kinds of intellectual work" or, alternatively, as "a whole social order within which a specifiable culture, in styles of art or kinds of intellectual work, is seen as the direct or indirect product of an order primarily constituted by other social activities"². A different view of culture is maintained by T.S. Eliot, for whom culture is a civilizing force and is specifically a "development"³. The civilized and cultured person is the product of culture in this sense (most memorably articulated by Matthew Arnold in *Culture and Anarchy*), although such an individual is inconceivable without the presence and context of a civilized elite within society who can guarantee and propagate the norms of civilized attitudes and behaviour. Of course, Eliot and Arnold's use of 'culture' extends to the artefacts of culture, such as art and literature, which are then not seen as the reflect of social processes (as Williams has it) but rather as the instruments or means of social and personal development.

But a second point of affinity between the modern terms 'spirituality' and 'culture' comes into view when we consider the historical genesis of both words and the specific associations which adhere to them at their points of origin. Despite the plurality of usage noted above, we can generalize about 'spirituality' and state that it tends to emphasize religious experience as distinct from, or in an unclear relation to, formal religious concepts or teaching.

This is its meaning (generally a derogatory one) in the debate between Bossuet and Fenelon at the end of the 17th century where 'spirituality' signifies the personal realm of religious experience and tends towards 'quietism'⁴. Underlying the term is a new emphasis upon the individual as an autonomous sphere of experience, which is visible also in the sophisticated spiritual psychologies of John of the Cross, or Ignatius of Loyola, and which would receive its classic expression in epistemological terms towards the end of the 18th century in the work of Immanuel Kant.

We ourselves find the concepts of the autonomous individual and the individual as regent of feelings most congenial, as these are in many ways the foundation of our own social, political and cultural systems in the libertarian, democratic and consumerist West; indeed, the claims of experience and the right to experience is one of the distinguishing marks of the contemporary individual (as any moral theologian knows!). The term 'culture', on the other hand, tends away from the individual in most modern sociological or culturological discourse; it is expressive of common and corporate values and norms, patterns of behaviour which serve to distinguish one society from another.

Originally, however, the concept of culture was closely linked with the notion of human agency and thus of a certain autonomy of the individual and of groups of individuals. I am thinking here in particular of the work of Giambattista Vico, whose *New Science* of 1725 laid the foundation for the social sciences of the future. It was Vico who first presented the case for historicism and began to see human societies as manifold and diverse developments from or expressions of the human mind⁵.

In the hands of the early German Romantics (most notably Herder), the innocent Italian term *mente* becomes the more philosophically loaded term *Geist*, and in due course the role of the individual will be absorbed and *aufgehoben* in the Hegelian account of history as the dialectical unfolding of the Spirit. But in Vico himself, two streams seem to have come together and coalesced in a way which, quite remarkably, allowed him to anticipate some of the most important currents of later (that is, modern) tradition.

The first of these is the scholastic principle that one can only know what one has made oneself (God knows the world perfectly because he made it); we can only truly know *per causas*. And the second is that elevation of the human person and the powers of the individual self which is generally characteristic of Renaissance thought. Thus, for Vico, we can know and understand history precisely because human communities are the agents of history. It is not the gods who determine the way things are, not even the Christian God in any immediate sense, but rather the human race itself. And thus its own history can become transparent to itself. If 'spirituality' and 'culture' have in common the fact that both terms are widely used in differing ways in our society, then they also have in common that their genesis as concepts reflects a new notion, appearing towards the end of the 17th and beginning of the 18th century, of the autonomous individual who is the focus of will and experience on the one hand, and of historical and social agency on the other. But so much for affinities; from now on the talk will be of difference.

Firstly, let me make clear the sense in which I am using the term 'spirituality'. For the purposes of the current debate, I mean Christian spirituality and I would seek to define this broadly along the lines which are associated with the Orthodox tradition, for which spirituality can be glossed as "the knowledge or experience of doctrine"⁶. This closely parallels Luther's notion of a *sapientia experimentalis*, and evokes the interpenetration of religious belief and experience which is generally characteristic of the patristic and medieval periods⁷. This definition serves to counter a tendency on the part of those who use the term spirituality to intend or to presuppose a distinction between religious experience (or content) and religious knowledge (or form). It is interesting that a modern opposition between thought and feeling, which hovers around the word 'spirituality', is quite different from the fusion of thought and feeling in the language of transcendental cognition which we find, for instance, in the Greek Fathers. In a thinker such as Origen, the notion of experience is always embedded so deeply in either a theology of apophasis or a theology of the Word that it can scarcely be said to function independently at all, but only as a factor within distinct religious concepts, doctrines and cognitions. We should note also, of course, that this same modern emphasis renders the term 'spirituality' problematic when applied to non-Christian religious traditions as well, some of which have very different presuppositions or prior understandings of the self in relation to religious knowledge, which are more akin to those of the Christian past than the present.

But if the concept of spirituality turns upon notions of the individual and of individual experience in this way, then culture tends in the opposite direction. Culture intends the corporate, whether we understand culture in terms of a T. S. Eliot or Raymond Williams, or whether we prefer the definitions of anthropologists such as Ward Goodenough who described culture as "what the members of a human group have to know in order to function acceptably as members of that group in the activities in which they engage", or Clifford Geertz who wrote that culture is "an historically transmitted pattern of meanings embodied in symbols, a system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic forms by means of which men communicate, perpetuate, and develop their knowledge about and attitude towards life"⁸. The nub of the problem is that culture is, to quote Raymond Williams again, "a realized signifying system" which implies meanings, and meanings are invariably shared"⁹.

The public character of language, which embodies meanings, has been well established since the work of 19th century linguists such as Von Humboldt; and Wittgenstein (with whom the argument against the possibility of a private language is more generally associated) stands at the end of a long tradition. To quote Clifford Geertz again: "culture is public because meaning is"¹⁰. There is sufficient structuralism still around in our society to support a strong tendency to assimilate the individual into his or her culture. The self is determined by the blocks of culture, whether conceived in political or social terms, which ground personal belief and action; although we may allow, with the structuration-theorists (especially Anthony Giddens) that the self also acts and is not merely acted upon. Structuration theory therefore offers a two-way process, a welcome idea which leaves some place for human agency – without which, of course, any notion of the autonomous individual will collapse and, with it, any notion of ethics and, of course, of the possibility or viability of the term 'spirituality'.

At this point I should like to take the issue a step further and propose that underlying the language of 'spirituality' and 'culture' are two further, elemental forms of discourse with which, sooner or later, we shall have to deal. It makes sense to me to speak of spirituality as the **existential** aspect of religion, or as religion in its existential mode. This thus allows us to introduce the language of **being**, or ontology, and to import a recognised and universal

vocabulary. Spirituality now becomes that which defines the religious **existence** of human beings. It thus fosters the language of inwardness and of being, a form of philosophical discourse which generally aims to be universalist in its application and presuppositions. The language of existentialism, such as will, being, freedom, consciousness, inwardness or *Weltinnenraum* (to borrow Rainer Maria Rilke's telling phrase) can be applied to human beings everywhere. The self as autonomous, willing agent is presupposed (caught, more often than not, between the choice of moral good and evil; how typical that is of Dostoevsky's studies of the existential condition in figures such as Raskolnikov from *Crime and Punishment* or Ivan from *Brothers Karamazov*). The language of existence is neutral, apparently free of local culture, and is crucially at an angle to history and the historical. Interiority, for Emmanuel Levinas, is that which resists history¹¹. It is fundamentally linked with the individual self, for whom all "is pending" and who thus escapes the closure of the narratives of history. Indeed, in a sense the individual self can be defined as that which defies history, since fundamental to the phenomenon of the self is continuity in the midst of change. Unless you and I felt that we are the same person that we were yesterday and then many years ago, there could be no self but only an aggregate of separate selves, continually renewing and multiplying in accordance with the constantly changing world around us. Consciousness implies selfhood which implies duration – despite (or perhaps precisely within) ambient change.

Culture, on the other hand, is contingent and constantly changing; it is like a sea in which we move and have our being. But there is a problem also with culture as a system of meaning. If we are to view the sea of culture as a system of significations, a web of interlocking meanings which sustain and support our sociality, then we shall have frankly to recognise that the uncomfortable juxtaposition of spirituality and culture with which we began has now reached puberty as a horrendous opposition between ontology and hermeneutics. Thus we find that we have stumbled into a no man's land, which stretches between the domain of the existential (the world of Heidegger and Levinas) and the domain of the hermeneutic (the world of Gadamer, Derrida and Ricoeur); this is a desert space, or a place of rough and treacherous water where two great oceans meet. The attempt to translate from the language of language to the language of being is as yet incomplete¹².

But interestingly there have been occasions in our own intellectual history when self and social context, in the form of a dimensionality of the **inner** and the **outer**, have been more smoothly held together than they are now. Let us return to the Greek Fathers and to the neoplatonists, for whom the inner and outer world seem to have cohered, rather satisfactorily, in a greater whole. Origen was able to develop the term *Logos*, for instance, which derives in the main from the Stoics, as the overarching organisational principle of God and the universe. *Logos* was nevertheless reflected in substance in the human soul, and thus became the principle of our own rational individuation. Christ, the divine *Logos* and image of the unseen Father, then becomes the supreme mediator, present at once within the creation as a whole and present (at least as a potentiality) within the human soul. For Plotinus, of course, a similar function is played by *nous*. What is different about us then? Why is it that the modern concept of the individual, with its associations of autonomy, of inwardness and experience seems so at odds with notions of culture and commonality? What is it that has caused this rupture in our cognitive world?

It seems to me that the emergence of the concept of the individual at the end of the 17th century is itself the consequence of even deeper changes in the structure of human thought which were taking place in the late 17th and early 18th centuries. We can point primarily to the rapid development of the natural sciences, and to an awareness (so clearly articulated in Descartes) that scientific knowledge offers a degree of certainty about the objects known,

which can challenge the view of the universe as mediated by the Christian Bible and other authoritative texts (most notably Aristotle's *De Caelo*). With the assimilation of the universe according to Kepler, we begin to see a collapse in a distinctively religious or Christian cosmology. Jesus Christ Mediator (to use the term preferred by Maximus the Confessor, perhaps the greatest of the early cosmological theologians) was the foundation of the unity of inner and outer, which was characteristic of Greek patristic thought. But there could be no place for such a notion of cosmological mediatorship in the Keplerian universe, and so what we increasingly see is the confinement of mediatorship in the western Christian traditions to the sphere of the ethical and the forensic – which is to say an Anselmian view of the Atonement (though shorn of St Anselm's own acute sense of cosmology). Thus perhaps the nexus of the spiritual and the cultural becomes problematic when the Incarnation redeems not the universe but only the human race.

In the first section of this paper it was suggested on the one hand that the conjunction of spirituality and culture is problematic and on the other that the very existence of these terms, and thus (in my view) their opposition, is itself the result of particular processes at work in our own intellectual history, which are particularly evident in the late 17th and early 18th centuries. The precise nature of these evolutions is complex and their clarification goes far beyond the parameters of this paper; I have merely tried to point to certain connections and to touch upon aspects of their history. But the complex relation between spirituality and culture is in fact an issue which informs a number of contemporary debates, particularly debates which centre upon our religious past, at a point before the genesis of the concepts of spirituality and culture. It is this which brings me to the second half of my paper, which is an examination of 'spirituality' and 'culture' with respect to Celtic Christianity.

Celtic Christianity: Spirituality and Culture

Those of you who are familiar with this field will know that it is one in which there is a substantial division of a particular kind. On the one hand we have a number of hugely popular writers for whom the concept of a Celtic Church or a distinctive form of Celtic Christianity has been unproblematic, while for church historians, such as Wendy Davies and Kathleen Hughes, it is a concept which in fact has no grounds in historical analysis.

It is tempting to think that what we are dealing with here is a typical divergence of views on the basis of academic rigour, and that the popularists, as it were, simply do not apply the careful systematic scholarship of the specialist Celticists; if they did so, they would quickly see the error of their ways. But in fact it seems to me that a deeper division underlies this divergence of views. Historians are trained in the observation and detailing of the political, economic, cultural, intellectual and other forms of expression, of social life. In the case of Church history, other additional factors will be taken into consideration, including (for instance) aspects of doctrine and forms of popular piety. But it is not difficult to see that the application of such a method to the history of the Christian Church carries with it a reductionist ecclesiology; there is an implicit presupposition here that, when we have detailed the political, economic, social, cultural and intellectual life of the Church, then we have described it as such. All we have done, in fact, is to delineate its political, economic, social, cultural and intellectual aspects. We have seen it as an institution and, although it may be recognised that the Church does make certain transcendental claims, the fact that we have applied to it the analytical methods of the social and historical sciences means that we have treated it and understood it as an object of social and historical interest amongst other such objects. In other words, we have implicitly secularised the Church and have failed to grasp it as a spiritual – or, better, as an existential – phenomenon whose primary sphere of expression must be in the inner life of the individual herself.

The disagreement between the 'popularists' and the church historians and the Celticists turns out to be about more than academic register therefore; it turns also on the definition of Church. An approach to Church which regards it, in the terminology of *Lumen gentium* as "the people of God", will recognise that in essence the Church is a theologoumenon, and thus must be analysed as a theological entity as well as an institution with recognisable political, social, economic, cultural and intellectual properties. The Church is, in a theological sense, "the mystical body of Christ" and it is constructed of all those individuals who appropriate or who have appropriated the Christian gospel for themselves and who experience in their own inner reality the essence of Christian existence and living.

But Church in this spiritual or existential sense will escape conventional church-historical analysis; and it is this, I believe, which has happened in the debate on the Celtic Church or churches. If we look at those structures of the early medieval church in the Celtic-speaking countries which survive and which are available for analysis today, then there is little that would support the idea of a distinctive type of Christianity in the Celtic-speaking lands. Among these sources we might include annals and chronicles, legal documents, land charters, records of diocesan organisation, some hagiographical texts, various types of archaeological evidence, place-name evidence, formal histories, papal letters and so forth. But if we look at another range of sources, which are not generally employed by historians, then we will find, I believe, a different story. In this case we shall have to look at homilies, some formal theology, much poetry, devotional and hortatory texts, some liturgy, some exegesis and some apocryphal texts.

A theologically nuanced reading of the sources noted above can, I believe, trace a patterning of theological and spiritual emphases which appear generally distinctive to the Celtic-speaking peoples of the early Middle Ages and thus constitutive of a Celtic Christianity. While not unique, their occurrence and combination is persistent and noteworthy, although the survival of these elements into and beyond the Norman period is more tenuous. That is an issue which involves questions to do with construction of tradition, cultural continuity and orality which lie beyond the immediate parameters of the present study.

The first feature is a characteristically Celtic emphasis upon the human body. This is evident in the penitential tradition of Ireland and Wales, which codified physical ascetical practice in a way that proved influential in the Church at large. It is evidence also in the traditions of the saints with their particular emphasis upon ascetical achievement. But no less important from the perspective of the body is the relative absence of the language of the (human) spirit: that is, those elements within the early monasticism of Egypt and Palestine which reflected the influence of a late classical anthropology. In Celtic hagiography we find little mention of the ascent of the mind or spirit to God in prayer, of contemplation or *theoria*.¹³ Without a superstructure of the spirit, the body is no longer subordinate and inferior to the realm of the human spirit, and it is the body that stands at the centre of the anthropological model rather than a hierarchically superior rational or intelligible essence. We should note also that the asceticism characteristic of the Celtic saints does not involve inflicting wounds upon the body in an act of blood-letting, but is rather an increased degree of discomfort, such as standing in cold water, sleeping against a wall, remaining awake, standing in the cross-vigil or fasting.

Other Irish texts, most notably *The Creation of Adam* and *The Evernew Tongue*, play upon the theme of a continuity between the human body, the world and the body of Christ, emphasizing a spirituality of incarnation and physicality. In *Fragment of the Dispute between Body and Soul*, a Welsh poem from the *Black Book of Carmarthen*, we find a spirited defence

of the body against the strictures of the soul, which represents a marked counterpoint to the traditional chastizing of the body which is characteristic of this genre.¹⁴

Parallel with this emphasis upon the body we find a striking interest in the natural world. Celtic hagiography is justly celebrated for its accounts of animals and birds spontaneously serving the Christian saint as if the Christian hagiographer wishes to locate the drama of redemption within the context of the whole of creation. The illustrations from the Book of Kells include curiously random natural motifs, and a number of Welsh poems from the *Black Book of Carmarthen* appear systematically to interweave the natural, human and ecclesiastical dimensions. Celtic references to nature generally differ from the fashionable *mise en scène* of medieval literature which is clearly patterned upon Ovid and Virgil. There nature is made to serve human mood and disposition. While there is a particular tendency for the Celtic author to note or to engineer the participation of nature in the religious drama of humankind, nature may be the object of delight (stroking Swans) or, more generally, simply be accorded a fundamental and natural place within the human world.¹⁵

An emphasis upon the fecundity of creation is matched also by a persistent privileging of human or artistic creativity and the powers of the imagination. This is visible not only in the Irish Gospel Book tradition but also in the mythological and quasi-divine status of the Irish and Welsh poet on the one hand, and the centrality of the poetic function specifically within the Christian domain on the other. Such things are not easily paralleled in early medieval Christendom where native poetic traditions were viewed by the Church with the greatest suspicion.

It is also possible to note a quite exceptional approach to the feminine as in the case of the tradition of St Brigid. Although it is difficult to evaluate the importance of this in terms of social and legal realities, the indecipherable mix of saga, hagiography and history which constitutes the Brigid tradition does present the image of a dynamic and powerful woman who in no sense can be said to play the role of a victim, such as is the tendency in the continental tradition.

From a theological perspective, the relative affirmation of the human body, the natural world, the creative imagination and the feminine can all be subsumed within a theology of Creation which finds its summation in the doctrine of the Trinity. The Trinity with its plurality and identity traditionally stands at the heart of Christian accounts of Creation, and it is significant that God is perceived as Trinity to a quite remarkable degree within the Celtic Christian world.

I began this paper on a pessimistic note, suggesting that the language of spirituality or existence could not be translated into the language of culture or semiology; inwardness is of and for itself, it is the *Ding an sich*, as it were, and cannot be reduced to anything else. Such translations or attempts at translation will somehow leave the final residue of inner experience untouched. In the historical realm the problem is further increased by the temporal distance between ourselves as analysts and those other human subjects who are the object of our study. But, nevertheless, I would suggest we can to some extent approach those inner worlds long removed from us by choosing to study their traces in the poems and songs which were born from them and which seem in turn to have fashioned the inner realities of others, in the melange and interchange of religious experience and religious vision which is the organic life of the community in any historical period. That this is a complex and precarious venture is beyond doubt, but just such an existential archaeology of the Christian Church is required if we who still inhabit the tradition are to know who we are, who we have been and what the future possibilities of existence might be.

NOTES

1. On the role of the medieval mystics in the evolution of European vernacular prose traditions, see for instance O. Davies 'Mystique chrétienne et culture européenne' in P. Poupard, ed., *Christianisme et identité nationale: une certaine idée de l'Europe* (Paris, 1994), 61-69.
2. Raymond Williams, *Culture* (London, 1981), 11-12.
3. T. S. Eliot, *Notes towards the Definition of Culture*, (London, 1962), 13 and 21.
4. Michael Dupuy has an excellent discussion of the word 'spirituality' in the *Dictionnaire de Spiritualité*, vol. 14, 1142-1173; s.v. *Spiritualité*.
5. There is, of course, a difficulty with the term *mente* in Vico's work, which at times seems to have individual meaning and at other times a more corporate or universalist sense. See Isaiah Berlin, *Vico and Herder*, (London, 1976), 75-76.
6. Cf. V. Lossky, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church* (London, 1957), 7: "the term 'mystical theology' denotes no more than a spirituality which expresses a doctrinal attitude".
7. J. Moltmann, 'Théologie de l'expérience mystique' in *Revue d'histoire et de philosophie religieuses*, no.1, 1979, 1-18(1).
8. J. W. Goodenough, *Encyclopaedia of Cultural Anthropology*, eds. D. Levinson and M. Ember (New York, 1996) vol. 1, 293; 'Religion as a Cultural System' in C. Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York, 1973), 89.
9. R. Williams, op.cit, 207.
10. C. Geertz, op.cit, 12.
11. E. Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, (Dordrecht, 1969), 55-57.
12. Paul Ricoeur attempts this in terms of 'attestation' of the self in his study 'What ontology in view?' in *Self as Another*, (Chicago, 1992), 297-356.
13. O. Davies, *Celtic Christianity in early Medieval Wales*, (Cardiff, 1996), 14-16,
14. For the *Creation of Adam*, see W. Stokes, 'The Irish Text of Adam Octipartite', in *Three Irish Glossaries* (London, 1862), x-xli. The other texts can be found in O. Davies and F. Bowie, *Celtic Christian Spirituality: an Anthology of Medieval and Modern Sources* (London, 1995), 79-81, 52-53.
15. See M. Low, *Celtic Christianity and Nature*, (Edinburgh, 1996).

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Spirituality and Culture: the Case of Celtic Christianity was originally delivered as a Lecture at Westminster College, Oxford, on 6th November 1996.

RERC Second Series Occasional Paper 5
December 1996
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ISBN 0 906165 13 X