Celtic Christian Piety

The Spiritual Dimension of Creation in Celtic Christian Piety[1]

Early Celtic speaking Christians had a firm sense of connectedness to the natural world and strong awareness of God's presence there. It was a dynamic relationship in which nature, also, shared an awareness of the divine within itself and the power of God's Word, the Christ, to interact with the natural world.

Celtic Christian poetry bears witness to the beauty of creation and a piety that recognizes nature's ability to cure life's ills.[2]

The beauty of a bird and her song was enough to lure a monk away from the hard work of copying a manuscript. A gloss in the margin of *Felire Oengusso, Martyrology of Oengus* reads

> The skilled lark calls
> You go outside to look at her
> To see the wide-open beak
> In the dappled cloudy sky.[iii]

Nature was part of the realm of God and was a blessed gift of presence as well as a dangerous environment and power. In the words of St. Patrick:

> God of heaven and earth, sea, and rivers
> God of sun and moon, of all the stars,
> God of high mountains and low valleys,
> God above heaven, and in heaven, and under heaven.

He has his dwelling in heaven

And earth and sea,

And everything that is in them.

He breathes in all things,

Makes all things live,

Surpasses all things,

Supports all things.[iv]

At the same time the powerful and unpredictable aspects of nature could limit and destroy life: "Son of God the Father, with mighty hosts save me from the horror of fierce tempests."[v] The climates and seasons challenged, yet strengthened human life: "Wild winter has slain us, it comes across the sea…what is there indeed more wonderful than the incomparable tremendous story?"[vi] There was, however, no sense that the harmful aspects of nature were evil, yet some believed that nature could be inhabited by harmful spirits. Endurance was a virtue, but there were also efforts to control nature through prayer; local saints were especially revered for this purpose. It was not unusual to claim that harmful consequences of natural disasters were God's punishments for sins.[vii]

Celtic speaking Christians were attentive to a sacred presence in nature that evoked unsolicited gratitude. It was not a simplistic "pathway" to God or a form of pantheistic nature worship. Nature slowed people down. They actually paused and looked. The song of the lark did not lead to something else; it was an experience all its own, a form of "mindfulness." Celts did not seek God by listening for the sound of a lark; it was the experience of the lark's song that evoked God's presence. Such an experience was a mutual seeing, an act of love. It was in their genes. In a ninth century poem the pre-Christian Irish king Cormac Mac Airt says, "I was a listener in the woods/ I was a gazer of the stars." Mary Low comments that the king "…would not worship stones

or trees, but would worship the one who made them and was Lord behind every created thing."[viii] The world of the Celts, including Nonn's world, had wide horizons and hidden depths of mystery and presence. Low reflects that they did not see the world as a sacrament, but experienced it in a sacramental manner.

Celts experienced nature in the context of their values of family and kinship. Their gratitude for larks and birdsong, animals, the earth, and the sea all expressed awareness that nature's gifts, small and large, were signs of God's love for them.

"I have a shielding in the woods, none knows it but my God./An ash tree on the hither side, a hazel bush beyond, a huge old tree encompasses it…/A choice pure spring and princely water to drink./ There spring watercresses, yew berries, ivy bushes thick as a man./ Around it, tame swine lie down, goats, pigs, wild swine, grazing deer, a badger's brood…/ I am grateful for what is given me from my good Christ…the prince who gives every good in my shielding."[ix]

But the patterns of nature have a dark side, also, that can bring ill or good to test a person's endurance: "In the black season of deep winter a storm of waves is roused along the expanse of the world. Sad are the birds of every meadow plain, except the ravens that feed on crimson blood, at the clamor of harsh winter; rough, black, dark, smoky. Dogs are vicious in cracking bones; the iron pot is put on the fire after the dark day."[x]

Poetry: The Voice of the Spirit and God's Presence in Life

Poetry was the voice of theology spoken through praise and prayer. It was the common language of life with God, a mirror reflecting the presence of God in daily life. Here are two examples from the area where Nonn lived. They are from a collection called *The Black Book of Carmarthen,* dated about 1250 C.E., yet reflecting much earlier traditions. The first is a tenth to

eleventh century poem of cosmic praise that reflects the pre-Christian Celtic awareness of the link between the natural world and the Divine. The "three springs" are sun, moon, and sea. The poem expresses links to God present in nature, human society, and the Christian life:

Glorious God, all hail.

May church and chancel bless you,

May lowland and highland bless you,

May the three fountains bless you,

Two above the wind, one above the earth;

May darkness and daylight bless you,

May satin and fruit trees bless you.

Abraham bless you, the father of the faith;

Life eternal blessed you,

Birds and bees blessed you,

Blessed you stubble and grass…

Books and letters blessed you,

Fish in the torrent blessed you,

Mind and act blessed you,

Sand and soil blessed you

All the good that's done.[xi]

The second poem is earlier, from about the ninth century and is a poem of praise to the Creator:

Almighty creator, it is you who have made the land and the sea…

The world cannot comprehend in song bright and melodious,

Even though the grass and trees should sing all your wonders, O true Lord.

He who made the wonder of the world will save us, has saved us.

It is not too great a toil to praise the Trinity.[xii]

A poem from a slightly later collection called *The Book of Taliesin* also reflects a common well shared by the earlier Celtic druidic world and the Christian Celtic world that sees the goodness of life as a reflection of the goodness of God:

The beauty of berries at harvest time,

Beautiful, too, the grain on the stalk…

The beauty of desire and a silver ring,

Beautiful, too, a ring for a virgin.

The beauty of an eagle on the shore when tide is full,

Beautiful, too, the seagulls playing…

The beauty of desire for penance from a priest,

Beautiful, too, bearing the elements to the altar…

The beauty of a strong parish led by God,

Beautiful, too, being in the Season of Paradise…

The beauty of the fish in his bright lake,

Beautiful, too, its surface shimmering.

The beauty of the word which the Trinity speaks,

Beautiful, too, doing penance for sin.[xiii]

Early Welsh piety and poetry recognized that human beings are part of the natural world, not separate from it; they are integrally related. The elements of creation give an insight into the

spiritual dimension of human beings. *The Book of Llanrwst*, usually attributed to the bard Taliesin, describes a human being in eight parts:

> "The first is the earth, which is inert and heavy, and from it proceeds the flesh; the second are stones, which are hard, and the substance of the bones; the third is water, which is moist and cold, and is the substance of the blood; the fourth is the salt, which is briny and sharp, and from it are the nerves, and the temperament of feeling, as regards bodily sense and faculty; the fifth is the firmament or wind, out of which proceeds the breathing; the sixth is the sun, which is clear and fair, and from it proceed the fire, or bodily heat, the light and color; the seventh is the Holy Ghost, from whom issues the soul and life; and the eighth is Christ, that is, the intellect, wisdom and the light of soul and life."[xiv]

Taliesin shows a firm relationship between human beings and elements of creation as well as the central place of the presence of God's Spirit and Christ in the fullness of human life. This mirrors the narrative of the creation of human beings in the second chapter of Genesis where the "earthling", made of clay, becomes a living being only after receiving the breath of God. Taliesin's Christian narrative has hints, also, of a creation narrative from the ancient scriptures of the Indo-European roots of the Nonn's Celtic ancestors. In the Purusa Myth from the Rig Veda the gods of creation sacrifice Purusa, the primordial man, to create the world. Various parts of the world are created from Purusa's dismembered body. "There are various versions of the myth which may be schematised thus: Purusa's head becomes the sky; his brain the clouds; his eyes the sun; his mind the moon; his flesh the earth; his hair the vegetation, his breath the wind; his blood the water."[xv] It is possible that the human sacrifices by the druids in Britain and Ireland have their origin in this myth because the druidic human sacrifices were practiced each year to ensure the renewed the

creation of the world. A thirteenth century Irish manuscript closely resembles the Indo-European Purusa myth and Taliesin's account.

> "It is worth knowing what Adam was made of, i.e. of seven parts: the first part, of earth; the second part of sea; the third part of sun; the fourth part of clouds; the fifth part of wind; the sixth part of stones; the seventh part, of the Holy Ghost. The part of the earth, this is the man's body; the part of the sea, this is the man's blood; the part of the sun, his face and countenance; the part of the clouds, his thoughts; the part of the wind, his breath; the part of the stones, his bones; the part of the Holy Ghost, his soul."[xvi]

These similarities between the Indo-European and the Christian Celtic narratives help us understand how indigenous Celts in Britain and Ireland may have been open to the teachings and life of Christian Celts. It shows, also, how the death and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth could be understood as the source of creation and the fullest expression of human life.

The Darkness of Nonn's World

Celtic Christians in Nonn's world also knew the dark side of life. Their awareness of the goodness of life was not naïve nor did they ignore their experiences of pain, fear, and hardship. The dark age of Nonn knew hard work, tragedy, terrorism, cruelty, greed, unrestrained passions, and injustice as a way of life. The pattern of life in the darkness of fifth and sixth century Wales was to be in fear and to inflict pain on others to maintain one's own security. Although the monk Gildas has been accused of hyperbole and cynicism in his descriptions of the depraved materialism and self-indulgence of royalty and clergy during Nonn's lifetime, his window into this aspect of life around her is not far off the mark! Life was like the rugged, relentless storms that moved from sea to land with destructive swiftness and discomfort. Dark and boiling clouds with their partner,

the wind, could batter and endanger farmer and chieftain alike with wetness and pain like a barrage of gravel. The same sea that was a source of life and a highway could rapidly become a nightmare destroying human life in its uncontrolled power.

So could people! Life was physically harsh and the quest for self-preservation bred uncontrolled passions and hot-headedness. Ever-present tribal conflicts, torture, piracy, and cruelty fed a culture of uncertainty and fear that, through most of its leaders, showed little respect for human life. But there were others who took the risks of following the wisdom and compassion of Christian life. An example may be seen in the legend of the conversion of Illtyd, a powerful warrior and knight. An incident recorded one-hundred-fifty years after his death describes Illtyd and his comrades hunting with the king they served in Glamorgan, southeast Wales. They extort bread, beer and a fat pig from a local Christian hermit, Cadoc of Llancarvan. Three of Illtyd's comrades immediately drown in quicksand crossing a marsh. The combination of the cruelty to Cadoc and the power of God in the saint's demeanor moved Illtyd to leave his life of worldly military power and embrace the life of a hermit. Later, Illtyd was chosen by Nonn's uncle, Dubricius (Drfryg), to be abbot of a monastic learning center at Illantwit Major. One of Illtyd's pupils, Paulinus, was eventually sent to be abbot of a monastery where both Nonn and her son, Dewi, would receive Christian formation.[xvii]

In a history of Lllantwit Major, Alfred C. Fryer comments on the austerity and cruelty of life in Nonn's world:

> "No wonder men in the fifth century fled from the world and tried to be alone with God. Europe was a chaos; Rome had been sacked; the Teutonic tribes were growing stronger and stronger; bands of robbers infested the land; the amusements of the people were either tasteless or brutal; and all around were tawdry luxury, cunning intrigue, and bloody warfare.

> "Here (at Llantwit Major) members of the schools, warm-hearted Celtic youths, knelt side by side with older men who had come to Llantwit to find a haven of refuge away from the strife, anger, and jealousy of the heathen world around them."[xviii]

As we have seen, Nonn's son, Dewi, when he was a bishop and abbot, experienced similar cruelty from a local druid chieftain who tried to drive Dewi's new monastic community away from Glyn Rhosyn. Boia and his wife used a consistent process of intimidation that included military harassment, a persistent parade of naked women to lure Dewi's monks from their vows, and finally a ritual sacrifice of Boia's daughter. Raw use of power, suspicion of and disdain for Christian presence, deception, and flaunting the value of human life were accepted conventions in Nonn's day. It took great courage to stand firm with a Christian response and example in such a turbulent and dangerous period. Fryer continues:

> "The hermits were the heroes of their age. [The monks and scholars of Lllantwit Major] went forth into a land of murder, arson, carnage, and misrule; but their self-sacrificing lives became centers of Christian influence and moral life again revived in a land which for five centuries had been under the dominion of Roman Emperors."[xix]

Yet it was not easy to let go of the undisciplined emotions and impulsive behaviors that had dominated their lives. As we shall see in Chapter 5, this difficult transition from unrestrained tribal passions, constant fear, violence, and vengeful hearts to a Christ-centered life would contribute to the austere spiritual and penitential practices of Celtic monastic life. Although devotion to Jesus Christ was intense among the local saints and monastics, their formation in Christian living often faltered and required austerity to temper the emotions, desires and accepted behavior of their former lives. Conversion did not guarantee mature Christian living. It opened a path of faithfulness to the process of becoming Christian.

Nonn's father, Cynyr, seems to have been a more humane and balanced leader than most of his contemporaries. Perhaps he, like others, sought a more peaceful and ordered society. Could he have learned this possibility during his education and Christian formation in a monastery with Paulinus or some other teacher in his native Caeo or in Pebidiog? What alternatives did Christian monastic teaching and life offer Nonn's world? What led her to seek that life? What would she have experienced in monastic life? What significance would it have for her world? We will explore responses to these questions in the next two chapters.

---

[1] I am grateful to Mary Low for insights used in this section and for links to early Celtic Christian nature poetry. See: Mary Low. *"The Natural World in Early IrishChristianity"* in Atherton, ed. 2002.
[2] See: Mary Low. *Celtic Christianity and Nature*. (Edinburgh: University of Edinburgh Press, 1996 & 1999.
[iii] *Early Studies in Celtic Nature Poetry*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1935. pg. 5
[iv] Tirechan, 26.5, Ludwig Bieler, ed. *The Patrician Texts in the Book of Armagh*. (Dublin: 1979, 142-43)
[v] Low, 182
[vi] From an eleventh century poem quoted by Mary Low, 183
[vii] Low, 183
[viii] Low, 184
[ix] From a poem of the hermit Marban as quoted in Mary Low, 190.
[x] From Greene and O'Connor. *A Golden Treasure*, 140-143; as quoted by Mary Low, 191.
[xi] *The Black Book of Carmarthen*. Trans. Meirion Pennar. Llanerch: Llanerch Publishers, 1987. p. 59.
[xii] Oliver Davies and Fiona Bowie. *Celtic Christian Spirituality: Ancient and Modern*. London: SPCK, 1995, p. 27.
[xiii] Oliver Davies. *Celtic Christianity in Early Medieval Wales.* Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1995. pp. 84-85.
[xiv] Quoted in Nigel Pinnick. *Celtic Sacred Landscapes.* New York: Thames and Hudson, 1996, page 20
[xv] I am grateful to Fr. Seán Ó Duinn, a monk of Glenstal Abbey in Ireland for this link between Indo-European and Christian Celtic spsirituality. The quotation is from an unpublished essay title "Some Aspects of Celtic Spirituality." More details may be found in his book, *Where Three Streams Meet: Celtic Spirituality.* Dublin: The Columba Press, 2000.
[xvi] W. Stokes. *Three Irish Glossaries.* London, 1862, pages xl-xli as quoated in Duinn, op. cit. page 2
[xvii] See: *Vita Sancti Illtuti*, XX.
[xviii] Alfred C. Fryer, pp. 23-24 & 89.
[xix] Ibid., p. 24