

CHAPTER FOUR

CELTIC SPIRITUALITY

4.1 Introduction

The rediscovery of Celtic spirituality, particularly Celtic prayers and liturgical forms, has led to a popular movement, inter alia, among Anglicans around the world, including those in South Africa. Celtic spirituality has an attraction for both Christian and non-Christian, and often the less formal services are easier for secularized people, who have not been raised in a Christian environment, to accept. A number of alternative Christian communities with an accent on recovering Celtic spirituality have been established in recent years in the United Kingdom and in other parts of the world. The Northumbria Community, formed in 1976 (Raine & Skinner 1994: 440) is described as follows:

The Community is clearly Christian, but with members from all kinds of Christian tradition, and some with no recognisable church background at all. We are married and single: some are unemployed, most are in secular jobs, some in full-time service which is specifically Christian, others are at home looking after families....Some of the most loyal friends of the Community are not yet committed Christians, but they are encouraged to participate as fully as they feel they can in our life.

The Northumbria Community is one of several newly established communities with clear links to Celtic Spirituality. The near-universal appeal and flexibility reflected in the quotation above, is a feature of Celtic spirituality. For many in secularized Europe, the institutional church has lost its meaning, and traditional Christian symbols have no significance. Some of these people are now re-discovering Christianity through the vehicle of Celtic spirituality. Celtic forms of worship are also easily adapted to allow free expression, and less governed by an ecclesiastical institutionalism, which a contemporary secular person finds difficult to accept.

Wilkinson (2000:78) has noted that the widespread popularity of Celtic culture and spirituality has led to two reactions among Christians. One is to join in the wave of what he terms *Celtophilia*, to idealise Celtic spirituality, often ignoring aspects which are less palatable, such as extreme Celtic asceticism.

The other reaction to the popularity of the Celtic tradition in the present day is what Wilkinson terms *Celtophobia*, to reject all that is of Celtic origin, assuming that everything Celtic is pagan and anti-Christian. While it is important to guard against an unrealistic romanticism and distortion of historical fact, in studying the Celts, there is much that we can learn from the Celtic Christians which undoubtedly has value for contemporary Christians. In particular, it is important for the Church in South Africa to identify the valuable aspects of Celtic Spirituality which are relevant to its own life and apply them in a twenty-first century context.

Watkins (2002:1) also warns against confining Christianity to a 'subjective, experiential, individualistic approach', which idealises the lack of institutional uniformity of Celtic Christianity. She shows that the more congregational style of church government in the Celtic Church, where separate communities grew up, which centred around a monastery, and were led by the Abbot or Abbess, is a reflection of secular Celtic society. The Celtic peoples lived in self-governing communities headed by a chieftain, which were combined into small kingdoms.

This model was easily superimposed onto the fledgling Christian communities. It was also a model which the more institutional Roman church felt it necessary to break down and supplant, particularly hereditary positions in the church hierarchy, and, as a corollary, the Roman church had to eradicate clerical marriage. By the twelfth century: "The great hereditary monastic families' power had been greatly weakened; attempts were made to bring the Irish marriage laws into line with canon law; clerical marriages came under fire and diocesan bishops and clergy received their power independently of family connections" (Condren 1989:139). On the one hand, the institutional church saw this as purifying the Irish church, and destroying threats of nepotism. However, to many Irish Christians, this would have been understood as an attack on their national sovereignty, and their cultural practices and Christian understanding.

This chapter will include a brief survey of the pre-Christian religious and historical background to the Celtic church, which was the soil in which Celtic Spirituality grew and developed. Following this, the essential emphases of Celtic Christian spirituality will be delineated and discussed, including the Celtic attitude to the material world, Celtic prayers and spiritual disciplines, Celtic views on work and education and Celtic art and

communication, the Celtic value of peace and the Celtic understanding of the Doctrine of the Trinity.

A brief study will also be made of the life and teaching of the Celtic church leader - Pelagius, who was accused of heresy in the fifth century, and lost the debate with Augustine. This chapter contends that his views have a validity which has largely not been recognised by the established church, and, far from teaching unbiblical untruths, Pelagius has been unjustly victimised by history. In contrast to the view which sees Pelagius as a dangerous heretic, to be avoided, many contemporary scholars, such as Davies (1999), Joyce (1998) and Streit (1984), are studying his extant works, with a view to rediscovering his unique contribution to church doctrine and spirituality, which has a lasting influence in the contemporary church.

4.2 The Historical Background to Celtic Spirituality

Much of the information we have about pre-Christian Celtic society has been written by outsiders who were somewhat biased against the Celts in their views. Among these are Roman writers, notably Julius Caesar, Cicero and Lucan, who write from a conqueror's perspective. For example, ancient authors accuse the Celts of polygamy, community of wives and incest. Other claims are more likely to be correct, for example that the Celts paid a bride-price, and that marriage was not considered a life-long commitment. Sometimes, marriages lasted for only one year (Gougaud 1992:11).

It is clear that the Celts were a vigorous people, who valued courage in battle, where both men and women fought (Gougaud 1992:12). They enjoyed music and poetry, as well as art and symbols, and their feasts were famous. 'At a feast the right of carving was reserved to the most valiant...to him who had cut off the largest number of human heads' (Gougaud 1992:12). Celtic culture celebrated and enjoyed life to the full, and life and fertility held an important place in all their religious beliefs and festivals.

4.2.1 The Druids

The druids and their religion were found only in Gaul, Britain and Ireland. Therefore, in these regions, the druids dominated life and thought before the coming of Christianity, and there was a mutual influencing of the two philosophies:

Local history in combination with insular geography gave the Celtic Churches a distinct tradition of thought in the British Isles. There, as in Gaul, the new country priests, seers and miracle-makers became the heirs of the ancient druids. They inherited the religious and moral power of the druids as well as their prophetic and poetic vision which were now enlisted to work for Christianity. ...For the Druids, everything in nature was good, but it depended on the will of man for it to remain good (Nicholson 1995:400-401).

There is some debate as to whether druidism originated in Ireland or Britain and was introduced from these countries to Gaul, or whether the druids came originally from Gaul. It seems more likely that their religion is of Gallic origin, although it is strange that traces of the office and religion of druids are only found in Gaul, Britain and Ireland, not in the rest of Europe.

The druids were the scholars, philosophers, physicians, prophets and cult officiants among the pre-Christian Celts. They held great power in society because of clairvoyant powers and kings and chieftains would not take any major decision without consulting them (Streit 1984:60). They were also reputed to be sorcerers with power over the elements “They change day into night, wind and wave obey their orders, they pour down fire and blood” (Pokorny 1997:70). The druids were those who possessed sacred knowledge of trees, or forest wisdom (Carr-Gomm 2002:3-4).

They were skilled in the use of herbs such as mistletoe for healing (Rees 1992:75). Joyce (1997:43) writes that there is no evidence that the druids were teachers of morality, or upholders of the ethical standards of their society. This claim can be made because very little of their teaching on ethics has been preserved. However, Pokorny (1997:62) quotes a single fragment of teaching, preserved by Diogenes Laertus ‘To be pious against the gods, not to do injury to anyone, and to practise bravery’ (Pokorny 1997: 62). This is clearly a summary of a larger body of ethical teaching. Caesar calls the druids a second governing class in Gaul, along with the aristocracy (Pokorny 1997:62). They therefore held considerable political power, as well as having religious and moral authority.

It was customary for an Irish high king to surround himself with ten officers including a druid. After the Christianisation of Ireland, a chaplain took the place of the king’s personal druid. The members of the high king’s retinue and their functions are described as follows:

It was ordained in Cormac's time that every high king of Ireland should keep ten officers in constant attendance on him, who did not separate from him as a rule, namely, a prince, a brehon¹, a druid, a physician, a bard, a seancha², a musician and three stewards: the prince to be a body-attendant on the king; the brehon to explain the customs and laws of the country in the king's presence; a druid to offer sacrifices, and to forebode good or evil to the country by means of his skill and magic; a physician to heal the king and his queen and the rest of the household, a file³ to compose satire or panegyric for each one according to his good or evil deeds; a seancha to preserve the genealogies, the history and the transactions of the nobles from age to age; a musician to play music, and to chant poems and songs in the presence of the king; and three stewards with their company of attendants and cupbearers to wait on the king (Matthews 1997:27).

In time, the court druids came to hold extraordinary political power, second only to the king. There was even a rule that a king must not speak in the presence of his chief druid before the chief druid had spoken (Pokorny 1997:71). Numerous ancient authors mention the druids, indicating that they were a well known and respected class even outside their native lands. Caesar describes them as worshipping the equivalent of gods known to him – Apollo, Mars, Jupiter and Minerva (Matthews 1997:16). This shows a respect for the Celtic people, and an attempt to understand their culture.

Caesar also claimed that druids offered human sacrifices to their gods. It seems that condemned criminals were offered in sacrifice at a great festival every five years. These were augmented by captives taken in war, and their number was an indication of the fertility of the land in the coming seasons (Frazer 1974: 856). This idea is repulsive to the contemporary mind, but for ancient peoples there was a logical connection between human life and power and the life-giving power of the earth. If criminals were going to be executed anyway, using religious belief as an occasion for carrying out their execution seems less barbaric than offering the innocent in sacrifice.

Druids are also mentioned in the works of the Roman authors Cicero, Diodorus Siculus (21BCE) and Strabo (64BC – 21CE) (Matthews 1997:17-18). Ammianus Marcellinus (330 – 395CE) describes the office of Druids and related officials as follows:

¹ Celtic lawyer or judge

² historian, record keeper

³ a poet, pronounced *fil-lay*.

It was the custom of the Bards to celebrate the brave deeds of their famous men in epic verse accompanied by the sweet strains of the lyre, while the Euhages strove to explain the high mysteries of nature. Between them came the Druids, men of greater talent, members of the intimate fellowship of the Pythagorean faith; they were up-lifted by searchings into secret and sublime things, and with grand contempt for mortal lot they professed the immortality of the soul (Matthews 1997:19).

Pomponius Mela, who lived from 18-75 CE, records that the druids had a wide scientific knowledge and “profess to know the size and shape of the world, the movements of the heavens and of the stars, and the will of the gods” (Matthews 1997:20). Hippolytus (c170-236 CE) also records that the druids were influenced strongly by Pythagorean philosophy, having been introduced to this form of thought by Zamolxis, who had been the slave and disciple of Pythagoras (Matthews 1997:25). Druids were the custodians of many different forms of knowledge: “They gave not only lessons in theology and mythology but also spoke much about the course of the stars, about the nature of all things, and the magnitude of the universe” (Pokorny 1997:62).

The druids left behind various ancient stone structures, which are generally assumed to have been associated with their rituals. These include stone tombs and stone circles such as that at Stonehenge, as well as individual standing stones (Farrington 1998:13). It seems that many rituals were performed in the open air, although we cannot be sure whether or not their structures once included roofing. Open air worship would accord well with their sensitivity to nature and to being one with the natural world.

Druids were believed to have numerous magic powers, including the power to cause madness, by means of a ‘madman’s wisp’, “a little wisp of straw or grass, into which he pronounced some horrible incantations, and , watching his opportunity, flung it into the face of his victim, who at once became insane or idiotic”⁴ (Joyce 1997:45). Druids also possessed the power to surround people with a protective force known as *airbe druad* (translated ‘druid’s fence’) or *snaidm druad* (‘druid’s knot’) for protection against enemies (Joyce 1997:47). The precise nature of the *airbe druad* and the *snaidm druad* is unknown.

⁴ The only remedy for this was to travel to the valley of Glannagalt, called ‘the glen of the lunatics’, where an afflicted person could remain in solitude, drinking the water of the lunatics’ well, *Tobernagalt*, and eating wild cresses until cured.

They may be alternative terms for the same thing, or two different magic practices. Druids also had the power to cause forgetfulness by means of a potion (Joyce 1997:48). Most of the beliefs surrounding the druids are associated with supernatural powers, and these powers can be used for good or evil. It seems that the rigid distinction between good and evil was the result of Christian teaching, and is not found in pre-Christian Celtic beliefs.

Carr-Gomm (2002:31) attributes the survival of druid traditions to the policy of the church in the period when the Celtic peoples were Christianised. It was official church policy, for instance, to christianise existing sacred sites, and to continue to use them for ritual purposes, especially wells, which became associated with a particular local saint. Many of the festivals of the pagan calendar were also given Christian content, e.g. *Samhain* became All Souls' Day. Traditions about some of the gods were also applied to Christian saints, and many parts of Celtic oral literature were recorded in written form by Christian scribes.

The druids were the educated class in Celtic societies. They were the judges, the doctors, the poets and the historians. In later ages, they tended to specialise in one or other type of learning. There were three classes of druids. The leaders among the druids, called *vates* or *ovates* were members of the king's council. They also have been described as "seers and diviners, travellers in time, ... healers, herbalists and midwives" (Carr-Gomm 2002:66).

The *filid* acted as judges and were believed to have prophetic powers. Finally, the *bards* were wandering singers and story tellers, who were responsible for teaching myths and traditions to the people (Streit 1984:60). The bards had a similar role to that of African praise singers, their praise and repetition of the great deeds of a king and his ancestors were believed to enhance his status, fame and glory. This role was combined with that of entertainer of the masses, as well as religious functionary.

Every bard had three privileges – to be entitled to food and lodging in any home, any time; to have weapons sheathed in his or her presence, and to be respected by all (Wood 2000:120). The mysterious gift known as 'the sight' is often attributed to the bards or poets: "It looks to the past wisdom of their world, it provides intuitive understanding of the present, and it allows them to foresee the future" (Wood 2000: 121). The office of bard was understood to be a vocation, and one could only fulfil this office if one received the necessary gifts. It was never a hereditary position. Training and study were necessary, but

could only develop gifts that were already present. It was the responsibility of druid teachers to select and train their apprentices and successors.

Wisdom was believed to be the result of observations over a long period of time. This either meant that a druid claimed wisdom as a result of living many years, or that he or she claimed to have lived many lives, and assumed many bodies. The *Book of Taliesen*⁵ includes a catalogue of the poet's past lives, some of which included existence as, what contemporary westerners would call, inanimate objects:

The second time I was created, I was a blue salmon. I was a dog, I was a stag; I was a roe-buck on the mountain side, I was a treasure chest, I was a spade; I was a hand-held drinking horn; I was a pair of fire tongs for a year and a day; I was a speckled white cock among the hens of Eiden, I was a stallion standing at stud; I was a fierce bull; I was grain growing on the hillside. ... The hen, my enemy, red-clawed and crested, swallowed me. For nine nights I was a little creature in her womb; I was ripened there. I was beer before I was a prince. I was dead, I was alive (Wood 2000: 86-87).

It is interesting that the druid orders were open to women, who were known as *ban-druí* (women druids). Brigit was termed a *ban-druí* and a *ban-fili* (woman poet). In one of St. Patrick's canons, he warns against "magi, or pythonesses or augurers, in which it is obvious from the connection that the pythonesses were druidesses" (Joyce 1997:53)⁶. The tradition of women poets was particularly well developed in Scotland, but was also well known in Ireland (Wood 2000:120). As a result of this cultural background, the early Celtic church had no problem with recognising the gifts and ministries of women, and incorporating them into their structures.

4.2.2 Time and the Celtic Year

For the Celts the day began at sunset, in much the same way as in the Jewish tradition. The seasons of the year were punctuated with eight religious festivals which all had a deep significance for the people. Time was understood as being cyclical, and the year 'follows the rhythms of nature in a continuous cycle' (Wood 2000:25). The Celtic year was often pictured as a wheel (Baggott 1999:69), and each season was introduced by a festival. The

⁵ Taliesen was a famous poet in Welsh mythology. The Book of Taliesen is an ancient Welsh manuscript, existing copies date from the fourteenth century, but originally it dates from the sixth century (Carr-Gomm 2002:19).

year was divided into thirteen lunar months, each represented by a tree, and associated with a character of the ancient Ogham script⁷ (Murray 1997:348). Ogham writings are “Found chiefly on memorial stones in the south-west of Ireland and Wales, dating from the fifth and sixth centuries AD, and hundreds of dedicatory inscriptions, mainly found in Gaul, to Celtic gods and goddesses” (Carr-Gomm 2002:20). Trees with special religious significance among the druids included the oak, the yew, the hazel and the quicken or rowan tree (Joyce 1997:52). The eight major religious festivals are as follows:

4.2.2.1 Samhain

The Celtic year began with the Festival of *Samhain* on the 31st October. It was a time when excess animals were killed and smoked to be stored during winter. It was also considered a time when the physical world and the world of spirits came close to one another. In addition it was ‘a time for reviewing the lessons learnt during the past year, for cleansing away any emotional baggage and for wiping the slate clean’ (Baggott 1999:70). Thus, the festival of *Samhain* had the same connotations as any new year festival, and was associated with the idea of new beginnings. It was variously known as *Samhiunn* (in Alba⁸ and Ireland), *Sauin* on the Isle of Mann, *Nos Galan Gaeof* (the Calends of Winter) in Wales and *Nos Kentan ‘r Bloaz* (the first night of the year) in Brittany (Murray 1997:348). It was a season of feasting and rejoicing before the long, hard winter set in.

Samhain celebrations also included the eating of special foods, for example, special symbolic breads or cakes were baked. The recipe and form of these breads varied in different regions:

In St. Kilda, a large bannoch was made in the form of ‘a triangle, furrowed’. In the Lowlands, in the ancient burgh of Rutherglen ‘sour cakes’ were ritually made by a group of chosen women, called the queen, the bride and her maidens. The bannoch is rolled by each in turn, Deasul or sunwise, thus giving it the strength of the sun, in its daily course (Murray 1997:349).

⁶ The origin of this term is associated with the Pythia, the pagan prophetess of Apollo at Delphi. ‘When prophesying, she sat on a tripod, draped in the skin of a python’ (Waegeman 1998:84). Her apprentices were known as pythonesses.

⁷ An ancient alphabet consisting of twenty characters, all formed using parallel strokes on either side of, or crossing, a continuous line. It is named for its legendary inventor, Ogma.

⁸ Alba was the ancient Celtic term for the British mainland.

Many traditional foods are still eaten at this time of year. Apples and rowan berries were also symbolically associated with *Samhain*. According to Murray, the reason for this is that both apples and rowan berries have five pips arranged in the form of a pentagram, “the hidden symbol of the old Druids and their fellow Pythagoreans, with which many traditions are held in common” (Murray 1997: 359). The rowan tree had special significance because its red berries reminded the people of the sun, and also because of the pentagram pattern at the top of the berry (Murray 1997:359).

The structure of the secret Ogham cryptogram language was based on five, as had been the Pythagorean number symbolism, both systems in use at about the same time. The apple represents the five changes in the Holy Grail, in later times, or the five transformations of the Celtic cauldron or rebirth, that predated the Grail (Murray 1997:349-350).

Many customs associated with pagan feasts, especially the major feasts of Samhain and Beltane, were Christianised, or their symbols reinterpreted to fit the Christian world view. As a result of the mystical significance given to apples, many of the games traditionally played at *Samhain*, and continued in Halloween celebrations after the coming of Christianity, involve apples⁹.

The celebration of *Samhain* included games, story telling and a great feast before the beginning of winter (Wood 2000: 34). It was also believed to be a time when the barriers between the seen and unseen spirit world were lowered, enabling the spirits of the dead to return and walk among the living, and conversely making it possible for the living to travel to the world of the dead. Fairy mounds were believed to be open gateways between worlds during *Samhain* when “the living, the dead and gods alike can move freely between worlds, using the mounds as entrances and exits” (Wood 2000:60). In particular, the dead were believed to seek out their families and homes at this time:

Hallowe'en, the night which marks the transition from autumn to winter, seems to have been of old the time of year when the souls of the departed were supposed to revisit their old homes in order to warm themselves by the fire and to comfort themselves with the

⁹ One game is called ‘The Apple and the Candle’. In this game, a wooden rod is suspended from the ceiling with an apple on one end and a lighted candle at the other. The rod is then set spinning and the object of the game is to bite the apple without being burned. In ‘pairing the Apple’, a player skins the apple carefully, so that the skin comes off in an unbroken spiral. The skin is thrown over the player’s left shoulder as the clock strikes midnight, and the answer to a question or problem will be found in the shape in which the skin falls (Murray 1997:350). Another game still in use is ‘apple bobbing’, where children try to bite an apple floating in a basin of water.

good cheer provided for them in the kitchen or the parlour by their affectionate kinsfolk (Frazer 1974:830).

The onset of winter was the time when cattle were welcomed in from the fields and given shelter, and so it was logical to expect the dead, also, to seek shelter among familiar things and people. For the Celts, who were so conscious of the interaction between spiritual and material worlds, it was obvious that family gatherings and celebrations would include the dead. This was not usually a cause for fear, but deceased friends and relatives were welcomed as accepted members of the family circle.

Samhain was a joyous occasion, a time to enjoy oneself before the onset of the long, cold winter, but it also had a serious side.

According to old stories, this is the time when the malevolent Fomorians, a race of monsters, exact their tribute of two-thirds of all the produce of Ireland, and when Aillen mac Midna¹⁰ makes his usual assault on Tara, the Irish court, burning it to the ground ... That even the gods and heroes of the Celts can defeat these forces only with difficulty makes *Samhain* a time for reflection as well as for feasting and pleasure (Wood 2000:36).

The Celtic tradition often managed to hold in tension elements of celebration with elements of quiet reflection. For instance, both aspects are reflected in a Celtic celebration of the Eucharist, and this is part of the attractiveness of Celtic spirituality for many contemporary Christians. The fires of *Samhain* also had a solemn significance: “Clearly, the fires at *Samhuinn* are a purgative, the burning sense of removing unwanted dross, the cleaning-up process before the coming rigours of winter” (Murray 1997:353).

Commenting on changes reflected in the history of the celebration of *Samhain*, Murray (1997:348) says:

At the time when the sciences, arts and political organisations were under a unified Celtic system of college-trained graduates, the *filid* or bards, from say 600 AD until the descent of the Celtic Culdee Church (comprised mainly of old Druids in, say, 1300 A.D) a

¹⁰ Aillen mac Midna was a legendary enemy of the *Tuatha de Danaan*, and also of the High King of Eire, whose seat of power was at Tara. The legend around this figure is summarised as follows: “Every year for nine years he had terrorized Tara by lulling the court to sleep with his magic music and then razing the place to the ground with his fiery breath. At last the High King of Tara asked for volunteers to challenge Aillen, and the hero Finn mac Cumhaill stepped forward. Finn offered to stand guard all night in return for the granting of a wish. The High King accepted and Finn was given a magic spear to enable him to resist the sleep-inducing melody and kill the assailant. When Aillen came, Finn duly vanquished him with the spear and his wish – to become leader of the *Fianna*, the elite warband of Ireland – was fulfilled” (Wood 2000:66).

systematic harnessing of inner and outer forces would have been commercially ritualised for the whole population. This has now degenerated into folk dances, games and divinatory rites, whose roots lie far back, in a more creative and organised past.

Murray's comments are true for a great number of Celtic customs and festivals, once celebrated and given a deep spiritual significance. In the present time, many of the outward forms continue, and are either given a new meaning, or trivialised. The most obvious example will be discussed below (Section 4.2.2.2).

In November, the Celtic tradition demanded the ritual burning of effigies and the creation of spiralling fireworks. Similarities to later traditional festivals, Guy Fawkes Day and customs associated with Christmas and New Year celebrations, are obvious. It was believed that for three days, the spirits of the dead were in direct contact with the living (Murray 1997:354). The symbolic number three appears again in the tradition, and early Christian missionaries to the Celtic peoples could easily have connected this belief to Christ's resurrection on the third day.

4.2.2.2 Yule

Yule marked the Winter Solstice, 21st December, and was one of many Celtic feasts associated with the worship of the sun. At Yule the ancient Celts celebrated the end of the reign of darkness, at the longest night of the year, which would be followed by the rebirth of the sun. It was a time of great celebration, in which many of the customs and symbols which we today associate with Christmas have their origin, for example, the tradition of feasting and parties over this time, the use of ever-green plants in decorations and the exchanging of gifts. The festival of Yule lasted twelve days, and this is the reason why there are twelve days of Christmas in the Christian liturgical calendar (Frederick 1995:19).

The Christianisation of pagan feasts in Britain and Ireland was a specific command from Pope Gregory I (590-604 CE), who wrote to Melitus of Canterbury and "urged that the feast days of the pre-Christian religions be 'sanctified' by their dedication to some holy martyr" (Condren 1989:160). A hundred years later, Pope Sergius (687-701CE) said that festivals of the Virgin Mary should be deliberately celebrated on pagan feast days, so that these would gradually become christianised. On the one hand, this policy was very successful, in that the cultures in question were rapidly and for the most part bloodlessly

christianised. On the other hand, adding Christian symbols to pagan practices created a large number of superficially christianised people, whose pagan belief system remained intact.

The Yule log was the equivalent of the ceremonial fires of midsummer, but was burned indoors, because of the cold weather. The Yule celebrations were a private, household affair, unlike the midsummer celebrations, as well as the autumn festival of Samhain, which centred around public gatherings at open-air fires (Frazer 1974: 833). This may be a reason why Yule never held the same importance as the more public festivals of Samhain and Beltane. Decorations using evergreen plants have continued to be associated with Christmas. In the pagan celebration, evergreen plants were given as an offering to nature spirits. Holly and Ivy were particularly prominent, and the Roman Church Christianised this custom by associating the holly with Christ's crown of thorns (Frederick 1995:46).

4.2.2.3 Imbolc

The Celtic feast of *Imbolc* fell on the 1st February and is a time of celebrating the end of Winter and the beginning of Spring. It is associated with the time of new births among the animals, and planting of new crops. The name *Imbolc* means 'the time of milking' (Wood 2000:37). Customs around *Imbolc* included lighting of candles in barns and dairies, and "families claiming descent from fairy women believed that if they had brindled (streaked), red-eared or pure white cattle in their herd at Imbolc, the fairies would favour them – they would be assured of prosperity, especially in the dairy" (Wood 2000:37).

A superstitious belief about the weather at *Imbolc* still persists in Celtic regions. The weather at this time is believed to determine the weather for the rest of the season. On the Isle of Man, it is believed that good weather at *Imbolc* means a bad harvest, and bad weather at this time foretells a bumper harvest later in the year (Wood 2000:37). This reflects the characteristic Celtic love of paradox.

The seasons were often symbolised as women in Celtic tradition: Winter the crone, who becomes Spring the maiden. *Brighid*, or *Britannia* is honoured at this time, and it is a time when women are held in honour in traditional Celtic cultures. It was also the time of planting new seeds, and ensuring a good harvest later in the year. Among the Christian

Celts, the celebration of *Imbolc* became the feast day of St. Brigid¹¹. This is one of many examples of the policy of the Church in Celtic lands, to actively Christianise pagan feasts and festivals. *Brighid* is often pictured with three arrows, or described as a three-fold goddess. The arrows symbolise the fire of healing, the fire of the hearth and the fire of inspiration.

The fire of healing burns away all that is bad and purifies all that is good.
The fire of the hearth nourishes and uplifts the body, mind and spirit.
The fire of inspiration inspires and draws us onwards on our journey of learning (Baggott 1999: 71).

This is one of many instances which show the significance of the number three in the Celtic tradition. Celtic thought and culture was well prepared to receive the Christian teaching of the triune nature of God, and the Celts seem to have readily accepted this paradox, as much of their tradition consists of paradoxes and ideas held in tension with one another. For example, the recognition that both light and darkness are necessary, and the valuing of home and family, contrasted with the desire for adventure and the seeking of new knowledge.

Imbolc, being a Spring festival, was therefore a celebration of life and of healing and life-affirming renewal, and Brigid was recognised as a fertility goddess. There is an association of *Imbolc* with cows, and also on breastfeeding, and “It is possible that the pilgrimages that took place on the feast of *Imbolc* were remnants of a Druidic ritual celebrating the fluids of the womb, amniotic fluids, waters sacred to the old religion” (Condren 1989:58). In particular, motherhood was recognised and women were honoured as mothers and life-givers.

Mother’s milk was especially valuable and was believed to have curative powers. The Sacred Cow symbolised the sacredness of motherhood: through her milk the life-force itself was sustained and nourished. By no means a passive giver of milk, she was an active mother, fighting for the health, safety and well-being of her offspring. Brigid as Mother Goddess at all times appears as the woman who mourns for the fate of her children and who is particularly outraged by plunder and rape (Condren 1989:58).

¹¹ Alternative spellings of the name are *Brigit*, *Brigantia* and *Bride*.

4.2.2.4 Ostara

Ostara was the festival of Spring, the celebration of which included fertility rites. *Ostara* was celebrated at the Spring Equinox, 21st March, and was the festival at which the *Green Man*, Lord of the Forest and *Cernunos*, Lord of the Animals were honoured¹². Once again, an element of rejoicing in nature and celebrating its power is present.

4.2.2.5 Beltane

Beltane was celebrated on the 1st May and part of the festivities included dancing around a May pole and the crowning of a May Queen. Both of these customs continue today in parts of England, but have no connection to religious beliefs. Orr (1998:113) describes the symbolism of this festival as follows:

At the early summer festival the Lord of the Greenwood, the young and fertile god of the vibrant new growth, beats the drums with his companions, pushing and pulling with their rhythms the laughing maidens who swirl and tease them with the dance of their ribbons about the May pole – til the Greenwood God takes the hand of the May Queen and together they dance, showering their blessings throughout the grove.

In earlier times, sacrifices were offered, in the open air, and often on a hill top, where there was a clear view of the surrounding natural features (Frazer 1974:809). In many areas, the corpses of those who had died during the preceding year were burned on the Beltane fires, called bone fires¹³.

In North-East Scotland, Beltane fires were still lit in the late eighteenth century, on the 2nd May. Beltane customs included the baking of a special kind of bread, and making cheese, which was kept until the next year, to guard against the bewitching of dairy products. The beliefs and customs associated with Beltane in this area are described as follows:

The people believed that on that evening and night the witches were abroad and busy casting spells on cattle and stealing cows' milk. To counteract their machinations, pieces of rowan-tree and wood-bine, but especially of rowan-tree, were placed over the doors of the cow-houses, and fires were kindled by every farmer and cottar. Old thatch, straw, furze or broom was piled in a heap and set on fire a little after sunset. While some of the bystanders

¹² See 4.2.3 for more information about *Cernunos*.

¹³ It is easy to see how the term "bone fire" could become "bonfire".

kept tossing the blazing mass, others hoisted portions of it on pitchforks or poles and ran hither and thither, holding them as high as they could. Meantime the young people danced round the fire or ran through the smoke shouting, 'Fire! blaze and burn the witches; fire! fire! burn the witches!' (Frazer 1974: 812).

Beltane begins the light half of the year, which continues until *Samhain*, which begins the dark half of the year (when nights are longer). During these summer months, marriages could be solemnised (Murray 1997:353). This has led to an association with fertility rites. An unusual custom was the establishment of *handfasting marriage*, which was an introductory, experimental union of a couple for a year and a day. After this period, if they wished to be released from each other, they were to have the freedom to choose another partner. Any children born of a handfasting union which did not last, were regarded as legitimate. This custom continued until the sixteenth century, when it was actively suppressed by the reformed churches (Murray 1997:357).

May Day, also called *Duir*, is a turning point in the year's cycle. "Its oak name, *Duir*, reflects the lightning struck oak, the Divine fire that comes down to burst the oak with superhuman energy" (Murray 1997:353). There is therefore an association with the revelation of divine power and with mystical inspiration by the gods. The sun wheel is a symbol associated with this festival, and has been incorporated in the architecture of many Christian churches, another example of the Christianising of pagan symbolism.

In Wales, fires were kindled using nine different kinds of wood. Oatmeal cakes were baked on these fires, and participants had to jump over the fire three times, or run three times between two fires, in order to ensure a plentiful harvest (Frazer 1974: 813). This is another of the many instances showing the symbolic importance of the number three to Celtic tradition, which paved the way for the Celts to accept the doctrine of the Trinity readily. In Ireland, it was customary to drive cattle between two fires at *Beltane*, in order to preserve them from diseases in the coming year (Frazer 1974:814).

As at *Samhain*, at *Beltane* the doors between the material and spiritual worlds were believed to be open, allowing individuals free passage from one world to another. They remained open for three days. In Breton traditions, the opening and closing of the doors to the spirit world are celebrated with rituals. "A ritual libation is made to the deceased and the enhanced perception given by this contact between the two halves, the dark and the

light, that make the world, and produces the inspiration that is reflected in the divine fire” (Murray 1997:354).

The lighting of *Beltane* fires and sharing fellowship around them united members of different families and clans, emphasising that they formed part of the whole nation (Murray 1997:354). All fires would be extinguished and relit from the central fire, emphasising the oneness of all. According to tradition, Patrick defied this custom, insisting that he perform the ceremonies for the lighting of the new fire at Easter, on the very day on which all fires in Ireland were to be extinguished, provoking a major confrontation with the High King and his attendant druids.

4.2.2.6 Coamhain

Coamhain was the summer solstice festival, held on the 21st June, at which the sun was honoured. It was a time of plenty, and therefore of lavish celebrations. It was also a holy day for the Druids (Baggott 1999: 72-73). Ceremonies are still celebrated by modern-day druids at Stonehenge on this day. The sun was honoured at the Summer Solstice, as creator, and at the Winter Solstice in December, as destroyer, or withholder of the gifts of summer (Vardd 1997:220).

4.2.2.7 Lughnasadh

Lughnasadh, also called *Lammas*, was celebrated on the 1st August, and was sacred to the god Lugh. Lughnasadh was the beginning of the hunting season, and the men would dress themselves in animal skins with masks, and perform animal dances. Lugh was believed to be ‘a great magician, warrior, harpist, poet and craftsman’, who killed the tyrant Balor, and overcame his destructive power and ‘tamed the destructive power of nature and protected the harvest’(Wood 2000:38). Therefore, This was another fertility celebration and the god Lugh was strongly associated with the agricultural cycle.

At this time, the Celts would paint themselves with woad¹⁴ for courage. This festival celebrated masculinity and courage. *Lughnasadh* emphasised and affirmed the masculine, as *Imbolc* affirmed women and feminine qualities. Thus, a balance was preserved, and both

¹⁴ a blue dye used as a body paint, obtained from the plant *Isatis tinctoria* (Tulloch 1993: 1805).

men and women were recognised and valued in Celtic society. There was a strong focus on the worship of the sun at Lughnasadh, which was understood to celebrate the marriage of the sun to the earth:

As the outcome of the union of sun and earth, the future harvest is assured, and Lughnasadh becomes both a celebration of the previous spring's fertility and the future strength of the land, which must survive the coming rigours of the descending year through Samhuinn, to its lowest point at Alban Arthuan – midwinter, when the sun is magically reborn and the day and sun gain in strength again (Murray 1997:356).

This festival included ball games, races and dances, as well as *fidchell*, a game related to chess. The aim of these activities was to strengthen the sun and ensure that it would still give life in the coming year. Another associated custom was the “Lammas Bannock”, which involved baking special cakes. Among the Christian Celts, these cakes were dedicated to Mary the mother of Christ, and were called *Moilean Moire*¹⁵. The bannock is toasted on a fire of rowan branches, as the rowan tree was believed to give protection from evil enchantments. The cooked bannock would be broken into pieces and given to the family in descending order of age, while they sang or chanted *Iolach Mhoire Mhathar* (The Paean of Mary). All members of the family would walk from East to West, following the direction of the sun, around the fire. The father would lead, followed by the mother and children according to age. After the ceremony, the embers of the sacred fire would be gathered and carried around the house, fields and animals owned by the family, following the direction of the sun.

The association of these customs with the worship of the sun is obvious. However, many were continued unchanged among Christian Celtic peoples, either without thought or question, or with a new interpretation.

4.2.2.8 Herfest

Herfest, the Autumn equinox, was a time of celebrating the harvest, held around the 23rd August. It was the time when the harvest was gathered in and was accompanied by feasting and celebrations (Baggott 1999: 73-74).

¹⁵ meaning ‘the fatling of Mary’

Pagan Celtic religion was animist¹⁶. The Celts recognised the presence of spirit powers in sacred places and objects in the natural realm, especially wells, trees and rivers. Christian Celts continued to associate the presence of God with special places, although they also saw God as present everywhere, even within their daily tasks and routines. Rivers were associated with the Earth Mother, and were considered openings into her womb, bringing life. Rivers provided the people with food, transportation, and were often points of reference on maps, which helped travellers to find their way (Corden 1989:26).

It is interesting to note how much of this tradition has survived, sometimes under a christianised veneer. For example, the Christian church has adopted the custom of harvest festival in Autumn. Samhain became All Hallows' Eve (Halloween, the day before All Saints' Day) and is accompanied by many symbols of the old pagan festival. Many of the symbols associated with Yule have been uncritically adopted into Christmas celebrations, for example, the use of an evergreen wreath for decoration.

The Celts made much of their seasonal celebrations, and were known for their feasting and enjoyment of life. We today can learn from their consciousness of the cycles of nature, and enjoyment of the seasons, as well as their balance between work and play. The fact that symbols were used by ancient pagans does not automatically preclude their use by contemporary Christians, provided they are given Christian content and used in the teaching of the church. For example, the giving of gifts at Christmas has a pagan origin, but is seen by Christians as symbolising God's gift of Christ.

4.2.3 Celtic Gods and Mythical Characters

The most important gods worshipped by the Celts were *Lugus*, the god of light and *Maponus* the god of darkness. Other gods were associated with natural phenomena, for example *Nemetona*, the goddess of the sacred grove and *Nantosuelta*, the goddess of the winding brook (Paul 1998:7-8). All the gods have an immediate association with the natural and visible world. In this, the ancient Celts had much in common with other animists around the world.

¹⁶ Animism refers to "the belief that inanimate objects and natural phenomena (e.g. thunder, a stone) are inhabited by personal spirits that enable them to act like human beings (Deist 1987:8).

Bellenus, also called *Bel*, *Belinus*, *Belenos* and *Belimawr*, was concerned with the health of the land and was honoured at the festival of *Beltane*. *Bran* was a king and prophet, who became known as the god of bards and poetry. *Dagda* was a fertility god pictured with a cauldron which was never empty and two boars, one alive and one roasting on a spit. The contents of the cauldron provided for his voracious appetite and for the needs of his people (Ions 1997:51).

Cernunnos was the horned god, the hunter, who was adopted by Christian artists as the image of the devil (Baggott 1999: 120). *Cernunnos* represented the close relationship between humans and nature, being half human and half animal in form. He had a human head and body, with hooves instead of feet, and antlers on his head, which symbolised eternal regeneration. *Cernunnos* was the protector of both wild and domestic animals, and lord over nature (Wood 2000:28). Evidently he had a following outside the Celtic nations, as evidenced by a stone carving from Rheims, France, where the Roman gods Mars and Apollo are shown on either side of *Cernunnos* in a subservient pose (Clayton 1990:56).

Cernunnos was frequently accompanied by stags, as well as having a pair of stag's horns on his head. He is depicted on a silver cauldron from Denmark surrounded by animals, holding a snake with a ram's head in one hand and a torc¹⁷ in the other hand (Clayton 1990: 56). He is also often depicted holding a snake, which, as it sheds its skin, is a symbol of regeneration (Wood 2000:56). Unity with nature is seen in a positive light, and it is noteworthy that the snake had more positive connotations than in the Judaeo-Christian tradition.

Don was a god associated with light, and constantly engaged in battle with the children of *Llyr*, the power of darkness. *Don* was believed to be the ancestor of the Irish and the Irish god of the dead, who received his descendants, after death, in the House of *Don*, a remote island off the southwest coast of Ireland. The Welsh equivalent to the House of *Don* was a tower of glass in the sea (Ions 1997:131). *Don* was believed to be asleep in a cave, attended by nine maidens, with a mighty cauldron. Wisdom arises from the world of the ancestors, the kingdom of *Don*, and even the sun, the source of all life, descends at night into the world of *Don* (Wood 2000:21).

Esus whose name means Master, is often portrayed as a woodsman, and is often accompanied by goats, cranes and a sacred bull. *Goibnu*, also called *Gofannon*, *Govannon*, was the blacksmith god. *Lugh* or *Lugus*, *Lug*, *Llew*, *Lleu* was a powerful god of light, who was honoured at the festival of *Lughnasadh* (Baggott 1999:121). He was the master of arts and of warfare, and a sorcerer who was able to bring back to life any of his followers who fell in battle (Ions 1997:51). *Esus* is thus credited with bringing life out of death. The Roman poet Lucan records that *Esus* required human sacrifices, which were stabbed, hung on trees and left to bleed to death (Wood 2000:29). However, this is most likely a reflection of Roman prejudice against the Celts, and Celtic art and tradition suggests a gentler image of this god.

Manannan mac Lir was a warrior god, who owned sacred pigs who would be killed and eaten, and then return to life. Not only so, but all who ate their flesh would receive the gift of immortality. This tradition and the tradition about *Esus* the life-giver reflect a desire to overcome death and a search for everlasting life. *Manannan mac Lir* is also associated with the sea. *Ogma* was a warrior god who was also the god of eloquence (Baggott 1999:122). As mentioned before, *Ogma* is credited with the invention of the *Ogham* script, an ancient Celtic system of writing.

In addition, the Celts worshipped several goddesses, including *Cerridwen* the sorceress and *Arianrhod*, goddess of the full moon and the keeper of the silver wheel of stars, which symbolised the wheel of life. (Baggott 1999:124). *Rhiannon* was the Welsh horse goddess, who rode a swift white mare and talked to birds.

The goddess *Brighid* (*Brigit*, *Brigid*, *Brig*, *Brigantia*) was the goddess of arts, crafts, divination and prophecy. She had two sisters, associated with healing and the work of blacksmiths. *Brigid* was honoured at the festival of *Imbolc*. Much of the symbolism around this goddess was Christianised in time and became associated with Saint Brigid. It has been argued that there was no historical Saint Brigid, and the stories around her are merely Christianised pagan tales. It does seem that there is a historical base to the lives of Saint Brigid, however. In fact, there is as much, or more, uncertainty around the role and

¹⁷ A torc was a traditional Celtic neck ring, worn by both men and women. Warriors would sometimes go

function of the goddess as there is confusion about the details of Saint Brigid's life. It has been suggested that the monastery at Kildare originally housed an order of pagan priestesses, the leader of whom was always called Brigid. If such an important figure were to be converted to Christianity and were then to Christianise the whole institution, this would be a phenomenal achievement. This would explain many of the traditions surrounding Saint Brigid.

Caesar understood the Celtic Brigid to be the equivalent of the Roman goddess of war, *Minerva*. The Latinised form of her name, *Brigantia*, is found throughout Europe, and she is variously associated with the goddesses *Belisama*, *Juno*, *Isis*, *Vesta* and *Sul*. *Brigid's* role is described as follows:

Brigit was the patroness of poets, and in her honor (sic) the chief poet always carried a golden branch with tinkling bells. Brigit was also known as a midwife, and her feast day, February 1, or in some parts of the Celtic world, February 13, was also that of the Roman goddess Juno, the goddess of love and 'aid-woman' (midwife) of ancient Rome. For this reason Brigit is known as the 'Mary and Juno of the Gael' (Condren 1989:57).

The Celts believed in three war goddesses. In Ireland they were called *Babd*, who hovered over a battlefield in the form of a hooded crow or raven, *Morrigan*, the goddess of slaughter, who determined the outcome of a battle by uniting sexually with the commander of the victorious side, and *Macha*, who cursed an army and rendered the soldiers helpless (Ions 1997:51).. *Babd* was also considered to have an insatiable sexual appetite, and was often depicted with a squirrel on one shoulder and a bird on the other, symbolising nature and fertility.

The Celtic tradition believed that there was a close relationship between the visible, material world and the spiritual 'otherworld'. This basis later enabled Christian Celts to be comfortable with the idea of a close interrelation between supernatural beings and humans:

Celtic religion was centred on the relationship and interplay of a divine element – what they called 'the otherworld' – with the land and waters. Guardian spirits, invariably female, were believed to dwell in springs, rivers, wells and hills, many of which still survive as place names. The ocean – a force of strong magic and mystery in surviving British and Irish mythology, was ruled by the god

into battle wearing only a torc and war paint.

Manannan, while the earth itself was regarded as female (Sandison 1998: 34).

In addition to the gods and goddesses, the Celts believed in a number of races of *mythical people*, who were invisible most of the time, but nonetheless interacted with mortals, and appeared to certain favoured people. The general term for the faerie folk among the Irish is *Daoine Sidhe*. There was a fluidity between the material and spirit or faerie world and also between the living and the dead (Cruden 1998:83). Beings from these different realms met and interacted quite naturally.

The Irish believed that they had had a series of divine rulers. The first inhabitants of Ireland, according to the *Book of Invasions*¹⁸, were the peoples of *Partholon* and the peoples of *Nemed*. These people shaped the topography of Ireland, creating lakes and plains. The people of *Nemed* were unable to subdue the demonic *Fomori* and eventually had to flee from Ireland. They were succeeded by the *Fir Bolg*, the *Fir Gaileoin*, the *Fir Domnann* and the *Tuatha de Danann*, the tribes of the goddess *Danu*, who were led by the gods *Dagda*, *Nuada* and *Lugh*. The *Tuatha de Danaan* hold a prominent place in Irish folklore.

The *Tuatha de Danann* were constantly battling the *Fomori*. When *Nuada* lost an arm and was no longer able to lead the *Tuatha*, a *Formori* descendant named *Bres the Beautiful* led them, eventually enslaving them. He was defeated and ousted at the Second Battle of *Moytura* (Ions 1997:173). The *Tuatha de Danann* were eventually overthrown by the Sons of *Mil* (generally assumed to refer to human beings), but used their magic skills to escape to the underworld, where they continue to rule. Their overthrow in the mythology may be a reference to the coming of the Christian missionaries, and the gradual displacement of pagan beliefs by the new religion (Ions 1997:42). The Celts believed strongly that the *Tuatha de Danaan* were alive, and it was possible to interact with them, and petition them for help in danger. There were also always people who claimed to have had contact with the “faerie folk”.

The *Banshee* (in Ireland) or the *Caoineag* (in Scotland) is a spirit that wails when a member of its chosen family is about to die. A better known mythical being is the *Brownie*

“a brown-faced, shaggy haired, brown clothed, three foot high faerie, who helps mortals with their work, finishing off jobs around the house whilst its occupants sleep”¹⁹ (Baggott 1999:125).

The *Coblynau* is a Welsh mining spirit, who taps on rocks, indicating where people should mine. The *Dryads* are tree spirits, associated with the druids and elves, and are forest dwellers, who love hunting and riding. The *Mer-people* are water dwellers, with tails of fish, and the *gnomes* live underground and guarded the treasures of the earth (Baggott 1999:126). Many of these mythical peoples persist in fairy tales of Western countries today.

There are several Celtic myths which involve ‘wise children’, those born with supernatural wisdom, or endowed with this wisdom shortly after birth: “those who possess extraordinary wisdom that they are destined to bring to their people – derive their names from apparent accidents that occur during strange and symbolic adventures during their infancy” (Wood 2000:10). Many of these adventures involve water and the ‘salmon of knowledge’. Thus *Finn*, whose name means ‘shining’, dived into water as soon as he was born, to escape the king’s attempts to have him killed. *Morphind* was thrown into the sea as a baby, but surfaced after the ninth wave and began to speak (Wood 2000: 10-11). These traditions precede Christian teaching on baptism, but their development may have been influenced by Christianisation.

Certain *objects* were held to possess supernatural power, for good or ill. These objects became known as talismans and were held in high reverence. Merlin was believed to possess thirteen talismans of power, described as follows:

White-hilt, the Sword of Rydderch the Generous which bursts into flame from hilt to tip if a well-born man draws it.
The drinking horn of Bran of the North which will supply the drink of any man’s desire
The Cauldron of Diwrnach the Giant which will not boil meat for a coward.

¹⁸ The “Book of Invasions” is part of the corpus of traditional, originally oral material which Condren terms charter documents of the Irish nation, including “myths, sagas, genealogies, law codes and pseudohistorical accounts of the origins of the Irish or Celtic race” (1989: xix)

¹⁹ Most of us would welcome *Brownies* around our homes!

The Coat of Padarn Red-coat which will only fit a well-born man.

The Mantle of Tegau Golden Breast which will reach the ground in perfect folds only when worn by a woman of perfect virtue.

The Game of Gwyddbwyll which belonged to Gwenddolau son of Ceidio (and is similar to the modern game of chess). When the game is set up, the silver pieces will play on the golden board by themselves.

The Hamper of Gwyddno Long Shank which, when food for one is put into it, will provide food for a hundred.

The Chair of Morgan the Wealthy which will transport a man who sits on it to whatever destination he wishes.

The Whetstone of Tudwal Tudgyd which sharpens the sword of a brave man but blunts the sword of a coward.

The Halter of Cludno Eiddyn which will provide a man with any horse he desires.

The Knife of llawfrodedd the Knight which will serve two dozen knights at table.

The Dish of Rhygenydd the Cleric which provides whatever food one most desires.

Eluned's Ring which the countess Eluned gave to Owain ap Urien. It makes the wearer invisible.

(Wood 2000:59).

Each of these objects was one in ordinary, every day use in Celtic society. Legends surrounding these objects probably developed originally because of an object's extraordinary beauty. Among the Christian Celts, many of these magical objects, called talismans, became associated with Christian saints, and were believed to derive a miraculous power from their association with a saint:

Even with the introduction of Christianity, the talisman remained a prominent instrument of power in Celtic wisdom. With typical pragmatism, poets and bards tell how artefacts that had previously possessed magical, pagan properties have now acquired miraculous saintly efficacy. For example, many Celtic saints were said to carry an iron bell, which after the saint's death was usually kept in a shrine decorated with precious jewels in an intricate design. The bell itself, representing the extraordinary abilities of the saint who carried it, has the capacity to administer life or death – on the one hand curing illness or even bringing the dead back to life; on the other, in the wrong hands, having the power to kill (Wood 1998:58).

The pre-Christian Celts thus had a rich tradition and mythology. Much of this traditional material was incorporated into Christian teaching, with the tacit acceptance or overt encouragement, of the church authorities. Some aspects, such as the actual worship of the gods, could not be adapted, while other material, such as the festivals and the Celtic

awareness of the rhythm of the seasons, became a natural part of the Christian Celtic celebration of creation.

It is also interesting to note how many pagan beliefs have persisted, some as ‘fairy tales’ for children, and others believed in varying degrees by their adult narrators. Many beliefs in good luck charms of Celtic origin also persist. Where there is conflict between such beliefs and Christianity, obviously Christians must oppose them, by means of teaching and example.

4.3 The Celts of the Early Christian era

The identity of those who first established Christianity among the Celts is unknown. There are several early accounts of saints who proclaimed the gospel in Britain and Ireland, long before the coming of the missionaries from Rome under Augustine, in the fifth century. Glastonbury was established as a Christian holy place before Constantine, and three Latin-speaking British bishops were present at the Council of Arles in 314 CE (Walker 1985:221). A legend tells of a visit by the Christ child to Glastonbury, accompanying his uncle, Joseph of Arimathea. The real origin of Christianity in Britain, however, is shrouded in mystery.

The Venerable Bede’s ‘History of the English People’ records that Bishop Germanus of Auxerre visited Britain at the request of British Christians in 429 CE and 444-445 CE. In 429 CE, he was called upon to stop the spread of Pelagianism, but became involved in a military campaign against an invasion from the North by Saxons and Picts. The Christian British were driven West by the invaders during the next century, until Christianity was found only in the areas associated with the Celts – Cornwall, Wales and Scotland (Walker 1985:222). Lonely islands, such as Skellig St. Michael, became refuges for Christians during the Viking invasions, and the terror and devastation that followed.

From these remote geographical bases, the mission to the peoples of Britain was conducted. It is often difficult to separate the truth behind these stories from the legends that have grown up around the figures of prominent saints, such as Patrick, Brigid, Columba, Aidan and Hilda. Patrick is credited with establishing the church, and monasticism, in Ireland. However, major monastic settlements were only established after the death of Patrick: Clonard was established by St. Finnian (c540 CE), Bangor by St.

Comgall and Moville by St. Finnian the younger (d579 CE). Much of the historical data about the ancient Celts and their spirituality centres on historical figures of importance in Church History²⁰.

The abbots, or abbesses, such as Brigid and Hilda, ruled the surrounding areas, in the same way as Roman officials had ruled Britain in an earlier time. Abbots tended to be nobles, or even members of royal families, and functioned as bishops as well (Walker 1992:222), or at least had control over who was made the local bishop. In Ireland, the socio-political system entrenched power sharing between a number of powerful people, so that Ireland never became an absolute monarchy, but was “ruled by triarchies composed of abbots, kings and brehons (judges), all of whom maintained a delicate balance of power” (Condren 1989:133-134). There are several recorded cases of double monasteries of men and women, presided over by an abbess, who performed functions normally reserved for priests. They “heard confessions, decided on the fitness of both monks and nuns to enter the order, selected confessors and veiled their own nuns” (Condren 1989:99).

Irish monasteries became known as centres of learning and the arts, and preserved much of classical European culture during the middle ages. Monasteries at Clonmacnoise, Durrow and Kildare were particularly well known. Religious and political authorities were often intimately linked, leading to the monasteries being termed “the most effective political centres in medieval Ireland” (Condren 1989:49). The Irish monastic orders, and the developing monastic movement in Wales produced missionaries who were responsible for the evangelisation of Scotland and England. The first mission to Scotland was led by St. Ninian, whom Bede describes as a native Briton who had been educated at Rome (Walker 1992:223). The Northern areas of Scotland were evangelised by Irish monks, notably Columba (521-597 CE) and Aidan (d 641CE).

Aidan was sent from Iona as a missionary at the request of King Oswald of Northumbria, who had grown up among Christians and wished his subjects to learn about Christianity. Aidan established a monastery on the island of Lindisfarne, which became a base for

²⁰ See Appendix 1 for notes on the lives of leading Celtic Christians.

missionary journeys to the people of the mainland. He taught young men to continue his work, including Chad (d 672 CE) who established the see of Lichfield, and his brother Cedd, who became a bishop of the East Saxons in 654 (Walker 1992:223).

At the same time as Aidan was at work in Northumbria, an official mission had been sent from Rome by Pope Gregory the Great, to the Southern Britons. King Ethelbert of Kent, Bretwalda²¹ of the southern Saxon territories, had married a Christian Frankish princess, Bertha, and the pope saw this as an opportunity. Augustine landed at Kent with a small group of monks in 597 CE and established the see of Canterbury. From this beginning onwards, there was friction between the Celtic churches and the official Roman missionaries. King Oswy of Northumbria summoned both sides to the Synod of Whitby in 664 CE, where Hilda (d 680 CE) was abbess over a double monastery. Wilfrid, abbot of Rippon, who later became Bishop of York, argued for Rome, and Colman, abbot of Lindisfarne argued for the Celtic tradition. The Roman party were at length victorious, and the Celtic churches submitted to the authority of Rome (Walker 1992:225).

The influence of pre-Christian Celtic religious forms still persists in the Celtic Christian tradition today. The great strength of the Celtic Church was that it was an early example of contextualisation of the gospel message, leading to great effectiveness of the early missionaries' evangelistic strategies. The message of the gospel was communicated in such a way that "pre-Christian religious paradigms and forms will certainly have governed the way in which Christianity was assimilated, but also the types of Christianity that became established" (Davies 1999:12).

The early Christian missionaries either won over the druids to their cause, or challenged them to a power encounter, in which they would find out whose god could perform greater miraculous feats. This kind of public demonstration was particularly effective in Ireland, where the druids were regarded as powerful magicians (Joyce 1997:44). Such a contest is recorded in the traditions between the druids and Patrick in Ireland, in which the chief druid was killed (Davies 1999:103).

²¹ The High King was a king with authority over a number of small kingdoms, ruled by lesser kings.

Some scholars have denied the existence of a separate Celtic Church. It is probably true that differences from the wider church were often unconscious developments as a result of geographical isolation. The Celtic Church developed on the fringes of Christian Europe, in areas that were isolated by the barbarian invasions (Clarke 1929:91). It is clear that the early middle ages in Britain saw radical differences between Celtic and Saxon Christians, fuelled by racial prejudices, apparently on both sides.

Their clergy would not eat or sleep in the same house with a Saxon cleric. And from the eighth century onwards a kind of loathing of the *Scotti*²² and all their doings and all their ways seems to have swept over the English, in which racial bitterness and ecclesiastical prejudice were probably nicely blended. The canons of the national synod of Celcyth in AD 816 excluded all 'Scottic' ecclesiastics from any form of ministration whatever in English churches. They forbade English bishops to ordain them or to accept their orders, the English clergy to tolerate their ministering in English parishes, and the English laity to receive baptism or holy communion at their hands or even to hear mass when they celebrated it. It was the English reply to the former Welsh refusal on racial grounds to assist in the evangelisation of their invaders (Dix 1946:577).

Thus, it is clear that both the established, Roman ecclesiastical authorities and the Celtic Churches recognised the latter as something inherently different, and separate from the Roman led Church in both doctrine and practice. Unfortunately, the differences were reinforced by racial prejudice, which led to mistrust and division, and also misunderstanding between the two parties. .

The Celtic Church developed a form of church government, which was different from the norm in medieval Europe. The structure of the Celtic church is described as follows:

The unit was the monastery. It was presided over by an abbot, who was elected by the monks, but their choice was usually restricted to the founder's kin....In this the monastic community resembled the tribe. It was usual for every community to have its own bishop; it was much too jealous and independent to depend on another community for its orders. The bishop, like the rest of the community, was under the abbot (Clarke 1929:92).

This unique pattern of churches dependent on monasteries allowed greater independence, although Clarke is a little uncharitable in ascribing this to jealousy between communities. It allowed freedom, also, for women to develop leadership positions, often as abbesses who

²² The term 'Scot' is sometimes used to refer to present-day Scotland, and sometimes to Ireland.

ruled over communities. The less hierarchical structures also allowed bishops greater freedom of movement, so that they were more active in evangelism than those bishops who had greater administrative responsibilities. Celtic bishops were known to leave their dioceses for a period of a year or more, become itinerant evangelists, and then return to their episcopal responsibilities.

Ultimately, the relationship of the Celtic churches and the Roman church was decided at the Synod of Whitby, called by King Oswy of Northumbria in 664 “to decide ostensibly on the date for observing Easter but in reality on whether the Roman or the Celtic Church shall be supreme in Britain” (Mellersh 1976:439). The Celtic Christians took the decision to submit their doctrines and structures to the authority of Rome. There has always remained a division, however, between the beliefs and practices of the descendants of the early Celtic Christians and their contemporaries in other nations. An early and extreme example of institutional prejudice against a Celtic leader is the case of Pelagius.

4.4 Pelagius and the Church

Unfortunately, Pelagius is best known to Church History as a man condemned for preaching heresy. He was probably Welsh or Irish, and lived approximately from 360 to 430 CE. Joyce is probably correct when he describes Pelagius as “a Christian Celt who inherited the Celtic belief in faith and good works, in the holiness of all life, and in the power of the human, through asceticism, to achieve perfection” (1998:58). Pelagius was a Christian scholar and ascetic, but not a priest or member of any religious order. The difference between the theology of Pelagius and what became the dominant theology in the West was not in the area of Christology, the Trinity or any other major doctrine. It was a cultural emphasis on the goodness of creation, and a more positive view of human nature than that fostered by Augustine, as well as a strong emphasis on the need for morality, and striving to be perfect (Walker 1992:206).

Pelagius went to Rome to study law, where he was disturbed by the lax morality and what he saw as the preaching of cheap grace (Chadwick 1984:227). He achieved a following mainly among young intellectuals who arose from the nobility. He taught that every Christian must ‘achieve perfection by keeping all the commandments of God’ (Walker 1992:206), and asserted that God would not have given us the commandments if he did not

also give us the power to obey them. This power was supplied through the teaching of the Scriptures and the example of Christ:

Equipped, then, with the knowledge of the good and with freedom of choice, and drawn by the promise of eternal life for those who should keep God's will, no one – once set right with God by the forgiveness of sins in baptism – could lack either the necessary inducement or the necessary capacity for perfection” (Walker 1992:297).

Pelagius desired perfection not only for individual Christians, but also for the church, which should be a spotless society, as God intended. Pelagius himself had a reputation as ‘a man of holy life’ as Augustine himself attests (Clarke 1929:86). Augustine’s major disagreement with Pelagius was over free will, human responsibility and original sin. Pelagius denied the doctrine of original sin, said that Adam’s sin was merely a bad example, not something which affected the nature of humanity, and asserted that it was possible to live a sinless life. Pelagius has been accused of legalism, but he saw the possibility of human perfection as being the result of God’s grace and empowering, not as something humans had to achieve in their own strength.

Unfortunately, most of what we know of Pelagius is derived from the heavily biased accounts of his opponents, Augustine and Jerome. A few of Pelagius’ own writings survive, but sometimes there is a suspicion that these have been edited or changed to suit the theological positions of his opponents. Pelagius was recognised by his contemporaries as a “theologian of note and a man of great personal sanctity, moral fervour and charismatic personality” (Joyce 1998:58).

Pelagius was involved in a lengthy theological debate with Augustine over human freedom and original sin, with Augustine emphasising human sinfulness and the need for divine grace (Pauline theology). Pelagius emphasised the goodness of creation and human free will (following the position of the Epistle of James) (Davies 1999:56). Pelagius remained substantially loyal to the official church doctrine, defending orthodoxy against both Arianism²³ and Manicheanism²⁴. His arguments against Manicheanism stressed human

²³ Arianism denied that Christ was ‘of the same substance as God’ (Deist 1987:13), i.e. said that Christ was not divine, but a created being: ‘Christ, though the eldest and highest of creatures, was still a creature and not in his essence God’ (Clarke 1929:68).

²⁴ Manicheans were a third century ascetic and fatalistic sect. At one time, Augustine was a member of this sect. The material world was condemned as evil, and Manicheans believed in several intermediaries between

free will and responsibility, and it is some of his arguments, probably taken out of context, that led to Augustine's vitriolic attacks against Pelagius .

Joyce (1998:60) succinctly describes the Pelagius-Augustine debate as follows:

The Eastern and Celtic traditions believed creation to be a graced universe full of the grandeur of God. Augustine stressed the incapability of nature and creation by themselves to either know or find God. From a certain perspective, both positions seem correct, but extreme positions were taken, and these overshadowed any possibility of agreement (Joyce 1998:60).

It is unlikely that Augustine would have denied the goodness of creation, or that Pelagius would have denied the need for salvation by faith. The difference was one of emphasis, and the same misunderstanding would be repeated in the eighteenth century evangelical revival in England, where George Whitfield was to accuse John Wesley of denying the grace of God. The majority of contemporary Christians would be more likely to side with Pelagius, at least on his view of creation and of human nature.

The issue is further confused because Pelagius' disciple, and fellow Celt, Celestius apparently took the views of Pelagius to an extreme which Pelagius himself did not support. The position of Celestius is summarised in six points:

(1) Adam was made mortal and would have died whether he had sinned or not sinned. (2) The sin of Adam injured himself alone, and not the human race. (3) New-born children are in that state in which Adam was before his fall. (4) Neither by the death and sin of Adam does the whole race die, nor by the resurrection of Christ does the whole race rise. (5) The Law leads to the kingdom of heaven as well as the Gospel. (6) Even before the coming of the Lord there were men without sin (Walker 1992: 207).

Augustine confused the teaching of Pelagius with that of Celestius and mounted a strenuous opposition to their teachings. Pelagius denied the extreme teachings of Celestius before Bishop John of Jerusalem and at a synod at Diospolis (Lydda), where Pelagius was received into full communion by the participating churches. Augustine responded by arranging two councils at Carthage and Mileve. These councils unanimously condemned

humans and God. They emphasised four cardinal virtues: Love, Right belief, Fear and Wisdom (Clarke 1929:48).

Pelagius and his teachings. The participants in these councils then appealed for confirmation of their views to Pope Innocent I (402-417 CE).

Thus, Augustine won the ecclesiastical establishment over to his position. Pelagius was conditionally condemned as a heretic by Pope Innocent I and later pardoned by Pope Zosimus, the successor of Pope Innocent, after receiving a confession of faith from Pelagius. Augustine then appealed to state authorities, including Emperor Honorius, who condemned Pelagianism and ordered that all Pelagians be exiled. Pope Zosimus then issued a circular letter, the *Epistula tractoria*, supporting Augustine and his followers, in 418 CE, and Pelagius and his follower Celestius, were exiled in 418 CE. The Ecumenical Council of Ephesus condemned Pelagianism in 431 CE (Walker 1992:208-209).

Despite the verdict of the authorities, and hence of recorded church history, Pelagius was clearly an interesting scholar and a man looked up to by many as an example of wisdom and holiness. He was also a Celt, and it has been suggested that the reason for the active suppression of Celtic Christianity by the established church of the seventh century is that it was overwhelmingly Pelagian. Pelagius is described as a 'philosophical expounder of an independent Christianity' (Streit 1984:67). His theology is the product of an independent approach, which offended the power-hungry church authorities, and also fuelled the independent spirit of the Celtic church.

Much of the opposition to Pelagius appears to stem from his independence from the Roman hierarchy, as well as his outspoken encouragement of women to engage in theological study. The fact that history records him as the spiritual adviser to influential Roman women is noteworthy (Joyce 1998: 58). This reflects an openness to women as spiritual and intellectual beings, which was not common in the church of Pelagius' day. It is interesting that the Eastern Church was generally more tolerant of Pelagius than the Western Church (Streit 1984:162ff). The Eastern churches may have been more open to diversity in theology and in structure, as there has always been a plurality of leadership, whereas the Western church came to centre on one leader, the pope.

The theology of Pelagius included a positive attitude to humankind and to creation, which angered and confused Augustine (Streit 1984:160). Despite efforts of later scholars to demonstrate the contrary, Pelagius held to an orthodox christology. He denied that the

sinful nature was passed on from Adam through the reproductive process, and was totally opposed to the idea that human nature could be so corrupt that humans would be unable to choose to obey God. However, he affirmed the necessity for repentance and baptism, in order to receive God's forgiveness and gift of eternal life. He also emphasised human free will and responsibility for choosing and obeying God's law. Pelagius emphasised the dignity of Christians, called by the name of Christ, and anointed to share his ministry as prophets, priests and kings (Davies 1999:380).

Pelagius was accused of despising grace by Augustine, but this is clearly not true. In fact, Pelagius writes of God's grace in three contexts: creative grace, the capacity of human beings for doing good and choosing the right; revelation's grace, including the law, and grace of forgiveness; and the grace of baptism (Streit 1984:160-161). He taught that human beings had the ability to reach moral perfection, although this would be a rare phenomenon (Joyce 1998:59). Pelagius wrote in strong terms of the need for repentance, in order to avoid God's judgement, both in the present age and at the Day of Judgement (Davies 1999:383).

Pelagius is especially harsh towards those who claim to be Christian but hypocritically do not live according to Christian standards:

That person is a Christian who is so not only in name but also in deed; who imitates and follows Christ in all things; who is holy, innocent, and pure; who is uncorrupted; in whose heart there is no place for evil, in whose heart there is only true religion and goodness; who is incapable of hurting or wounding anyone, but can only come to the aid of everyone (Pelagius 'On the Christian Life', quoted in Davies 1999:387).

The influence of Pelagius on the development of Celtic Christian thought and later British Christianity has been much debated, but he seems to have been both a product of the Celtic church, and a contributor to the development of its unique ethos. His influence is felt today in many parts of the Anglican communion, where his teaching has become accepted, rather than the doctrines of Augustine, which came to play a dominant role, both in the Roman Catholic Church and in many of the Protestant traditions.

4.5 The Celtic View of the Material World

One of the strengths of Celtic Spirituality is the overcoming of the typically Western dichotomy between the spiritual and the material, which inevitably leads one to devalue one or the other. For example, Thomas a Kempis could write of the created world that it is a source of “lower delights” which should be left behind in order to achieve spiritual fulfilment (Foster & Smith 1993:272). Some tend to view the material world as evil, or at least inferior to the world of ‘pure spirit’. Others try to build their lives entirely on material and materialistic values.

Paper (1997:231) makes a general statement that in non-Western cultures ‘The numinous is never at a distance’. This is certainly true of both ancient Celtic and African spirituality. The strength of Celtic Christian Spirituality is that it maintained this awareness of the sacred in ordinary things and events, as a result of which the culture and society became thoroughly Christianised.

The ancient Celts believed that in the beginning, two opposite principles existed, God and *Cythrawl*, understood as Chaos. The world was formed by God out of chaos, and existed as three forms of life. *Abred* was the term for the present, physical life, understood as a life of suffering and struggle ‘where all is change: birth, becoming, marriage, begetting, dying and rebirth’. *Gwynffrydd* is the state into which the soul passes after having purified itself through several lives in *Abred*. Finally, there is the state of *Ceugant* ‘the ultimate state of pure rejoicing existence to which life continually aspires’ (Murray 1997:360).

A comparison could be made between this state known as *Ceugant*, and the Hindu or Buddhist aspiring to reach Nirvana, conceived of as an ideal state. In all three religious traditions, the ideal is understood as a condition or state, not as a location, and generally associated both with peace and with a loss of individual identity. Deist (1987: 114) defines Nirvana as follows:

1. A BUDDHIST term for the transformed state of consciousness beyond all existence and passion.
2. In HINDUISM the place or state of total unification with Brahma.
3. A place or state of bliss.

The ancient Celtic Christians had a deep appreciation for nature as God's creation. This does not mean that they were pantheists²⁵ – God was not identified with His creation, but nature was a means of revelation, and was understood to reflect the glory of God. They had a strong sense of the immanence of God, of His presence and involvement in ordinary events and tasks. The ancient Celtic Christians also understood that they were part of nature, not set over against the rest of creation with a license to use and exploit it for pleasure. Celtic Spirituality is 'intertwined with the world of nature' (Nasr 1996:200). It is this respect for nature and the earth which has made Celtic Spirituality attractive to the contemporary church, faced with a major environmental crisis in the twenty-first century, due to generations of mismanagement²⁶.

The earth was honoured as a creature, and every part of creation was accorded respect: trees, animals, and even the seasons of the year:

To the Celts everything was sacred. Everything bore the fingerprint of the Creator: therefore, whenever anything was taken from creation for use, it was honoured. If wood was being taken, a simple ceremony would take place to honour the trees. Animals were killed for food humanely.... Cooking was a healing and nourishing ritual. Everything was done in a spiritual manner and with honour and respect for creation (Baggott 1999: 69)

The Christian Celts remained aware of the changing seasons, and many of their native customs and feasts were Christianised, so that saints replaced pagan gods and goddesses. A clear example is the custom of honouring Mary the Mother of Christ at the Feast of *Lughnasadh*, and the singing of the Paean of Mary:

On the feast day of Mary the fragrant
Mother of the Shepherd of the flocks,
I cut me a handful of the new corn
I dried it gently in the sun,
I rubbed it sharply from the husk,
With mine own palms.

²⁵ Pantheism is defined as "the belief that God is in everything and that the visible world is an emanation of God's being" (Deist 1987:122). In Pantheism, God is identified with creation. This is sometimes contrasted with pantheism, which acknowledges God's presence in all created things, while seeing God as clearly transcendent and separate from his creation.

²⁶ Examples of mismanagement of natural resources would include humanity's steady erosion of non-renewable resources, such as petroleum products and minerals, pollution of the environment and the destruction of the ozone layer above the poles. Efforts are currently being made to educate the general population about the problems, but this may well be too little and too late. Two world summits have been held on the environment, one at Rio de Janeiro in 1992, and one held in Johannesburg in August 2002, entitled "The World Summit on Sustainable Development".

I ground it in a quorn on Friday,
I baked it on a fan of sheep skin,
I toasted it to a fire of Rowan,
And I shared it round my people.

I went sunways round my dwelling,
In the name of the Mary Mother,
Who promised to preserve me,
Who did preserve me,
And who will preserve me.

In peace, in flocks,
In righteousness of heart,
In labour, in love,
In wisdom, in mercy,
For the sake of Thy Passion,
Thou Christ of Grace
Who till the day of my death
Wilt never forsake me!
Oh, till the day of my death
Wilt never forsake me! (Murray 1997:355-356).

The Celts also believed that the whole of creation suffered with Christ on the cross and “all of the elements – the fair sea, the blue sky, the earth itself – were changed in their appearance, lamenting their calamity, groaning in an anguish beyond words” (Lane 1994:14). God was seen as intimately involved with his creation, so that when he suffered in Christ, all of creation shared in this suffering. Paul expresses a similar thought in Romans 8:22, but for Paul, the suffering of creation anticipates the coming resurrection and the parousia, whereas in Christian Celtic thought, the suffering of creation reflected the suffering of Christ.

Celtic spirituality emphasises the need to reflect the rhythm of the seasons and to live in harmony with the world of nature (O’Donohue 1998:205-207). The Celts were always conscious of God’s presence in ordinary natural objects, and, by extension, in everyday events and activities. Wells, in particular, were considered sacred places, and often considered openings into the womb of Mother Earth (O’Donohue 1998:116). Many wells are still associated with the Celtic saints.²⁷

²⁷The contemporary re-introduction of well dressing and blessing ceremonies such as at St. Anne’s Well in Buxton,, Derbyshire, on the Thursday nearest midsummer day is an example of a revival of reverence for wells as God’s provision (Rees 1992:43). The scenes depicted in flowers around the wells are almost all

It would seem that for the Celt every spring, river, lake, mountain and forest was a sanctuary, so that, like other early peoples, they dwelt in a sacral environment. This in turn meant that every act of daily life was invested with religious significance (Wakefield 1993:83).

It is this emphasis on the integration of spirituality with every aspect of life that correlates with the concerns of contemporary men and women. We have lost the sense of God's presence as a result of the tendency to privatise and secularise our religion and beliefs, and there is a widespread desire to recover this awareness. De Waal (1984:7) rightly says that Celtic verse is 'shot through with an awareness of God's presence that can speak to men and women today.'

The relationship of the ancient Celts to God and to His creation was inseparably linked, and they sought to live in harmony with all things. This suggests a similar emphasis with that of St. Francis of Assisi:

The spirit of St. Columba is a spirit which, like that of St. Francis, combines, and ranges between, the two poles of earth and Heaven, between what we might call for want of better terms, a mystique and a mysticism. A mystique of the natural world and a mysticism towards its Creator (Finan 1995:70).

Christian and pre-Christian Celts felt great reverence for sacred places of historical and cultic significance (Davies 1999:14). For the pagan Celts, sacred places would be based in an animistic belief in sacred mountains, wood glades or lakes or springs. Many of these were later Christianised, and associated with one or more of the Celtic saints. The Celts were uniquely aware of the presence of spiritual beings in the material world, and of the integration of spiritual and material aspects of life. The Celtic tradition was always conscious of the nearness of the spirit world, and spiritual beings were as real to them as visible, physical presences. In this connection, Mackey (1995: 10-11) says:

...no-one who does not come to grips with the nearness of the spirit world will ever understand Celtic Christianity....The nearness, the ubiquitous *presence* of the spiritual in all things and at all times, though needing its special times and places too as a picture needs a

biblical or religious, and often local churches and church organisations are involved, and compete against each other for a trophy. Well dressing has become an annual community event, in addition to being a tourist attraction.

frame in order to focus its universality, is indeed a powerful, permanent, and characteristic Celtic conviction.

It was natural for the Celts to address spiritual beings as they went about their daily activities, and to expect help and guidance from these beings. For Celtic Christians, their unseen companions included the angels and saints, particularly Mary, the Mother of Christ and the Archangel Michael. These beings were as real as the material world and beings around them, and they expected to interact with their unseen guides, just as they interacted with friends, family members and comrades. If contemporary Western Christians find this strange, and have a need to go to special places at special times in order to experience the reality of God and the spiritual, this is simply a reflection of the dichotomies and contradictions with which we live.

Mackey (1995:13) describes Celtic spirituality as follows:

In Celtic Christianity God's gracious power, God's spirit, one might say God's grace, is everywhere in the natural world and in all our dealings in it, as much as it is in all those spiritual persons who are on God's side or who have gone to God's side at last.

It is important to note, however, that an awareness of the spiritual dimension of reality did not imply, for the ancient Celtic Christians, a denial of the reality of the material world. In the Celtic world view, the visible and invisible dimensions formed one inter-connected reality, and they were able to interact with spiritual and material beings equally (Mackey 1995:12). There was no discomfort attached to human interaction with non-material beings. It was accepted as part of life, and there was no rigid distinction between 'natural' and 'supernatural'. For Celtic Christians, all of reality was God's creation, and therefore a united whole.

The ancient Celts had a realistic view of the world, which is alien to much of the romanticizing of Celtic culture and spirituality current today: "...nature itself is seen with the natural eye in the concrete detail that was also a Celtic characteristic, despite the modern Celtic reputation for the mistily mystical and the vaguely twilit" (Finan 1995: 78). It is not true that Celts had lost touch with reality, rather, they were engaged with a greater reality, in which spiritual and material formed an integrated whole.

Evil spiritual beings were also acknowledged, and their existence and influence was considered self-evident. God's protection from the power of evil was constantly sought through forms of prayer such as the *lorica*²⁸ or breastplate (Davies 1999:xvii).

4.6 The Celtic View of Work and Education

In Celtic spirituality, the dichotomy between spiritual and material is overcome and a sense of value and respect is given to work, especially manual labour. The Celtic monks were known for a balanced life-style involving both physical and mental work:

The Celtic monks devoted themselves to manual labour: tilling, rearing cattle, making jewellery...copying manuscripts. In the beginning these monks were not intellectuals, but since they had to read the Bible and celebrate the liturgy in Latin they applied themselves very soon to the study of this foreign language.... (McGinn, Meyendorff and Leclercq 1996: 176).

This is a very interesting point. In general, members of Celtic monastic orders were not known for being members of the upper classes or particularly well read. Columba is an obvious exception, as he was the son of a nobleman. Part of their spiritual discipline was regular and systematic exposure to manual labour. However, this was to be balanced with study and worship, which led to intellectual and scholastic development, as well as the development of artistic skills, such as ornate wood carvings and illumination of manuscripts. Thus, there is no opposition between manual tasks and intellectual development. The Celts understood that development in the one area would reinforce and strengthen the other.

Not only was their own education and intellectual development valued, the Celtic monks saw themselves as responsible for the care and education of children. In this, they attempted to displace the Druids, who had educated and mentored sons of the aristocracy before the coming of Christianity:

Hagiographical texts give us rather precise instructions regarding the practice of fosterage....The child was entrusted to a monk, who entered a kind of spiritual parenthood with him. If sons of aristocrats were entrusted provisionally to a monk, they later returned to their families, or else, offered to God, they became

²⁸ A poetic prayer for protection, several examples are found in Celtic literature, the best known attributed to St. Patrick. See Appendix Two for examples.

novices in monastic life (McGinn, Meyendorff and Leclercq 1996: 176)

Columba himself, being a member of a noble Irish family, had been educated by druids, and learned the Ogham script by eating a bannock²⁹ a day, each with a different letter impressed on it (Murray 1997:349).

Another result of the absence of a dichotomy between sacred and secular spheres of life is that knowledge is seen as a unity. All other aspects of education, whether arts or sciences, are seen as helpful for acquiring knowledge of God's world, and helpful for mental and spiritual development. There was no fear of new and unexplored areas. The ancient Celts approached new frontiers, whether geographical or intellectual, with an eagerness and expectation unparalleled even in the modern era:

In truth, there was only one science, that of the Scriptures. Other studies were regarded only as servants or auxiliaries of religious education. The liberal arts, the study of ancient languages, all secular culture had, in theory, for sole end to render the mind fit for the *lectio divina*, that is to say, the study of the divine thought embodied in the words of the Bible and in tradition... calligraphy and illumination (arts held in high honour in the isles) were employed almost wholly ... in multiplying and adorning religious books, liturgical or biblical texts (Gougaud 1992:257).

Thus the goal and purpose of Celtic learning may have been religious, but their willingness to discover truth led to intellectual and skills development far beyond what contemporary scholars would classify as religious. Gougaud plainly believes that the sole purpose of education in other fields was to develop the mind in order to better understand the Scriptures. While this may have been true for some, the imagination of the ancient Celts ranged far wider than this.

It is unfortunate that many Western scholars assume that religion and especially monasticism was alien to science and knowledge. For instance, the church's persecution of Galileo for his statement that the sun, not the earth, is the centre of the solar system, is frequently quoted to show that the church is against scientific knowledge. This was not the church's finest hour, but cannot be used to argue that science and religion are

²⁹ A bannock is a long, flat loaf of bread, often unleavened.

incompatible. This was certainly not true of the Celtic monastic orders, or of Celtic Christian thought in general.

4.7 Celtic Spiritual Disciplines

Celtic Christians were also known for rigorous ascetic practises, some of which are difficult for present day Christians to understand. The aim behind these practices was to teach the monks self-discipline and physical endurance. Examples of such practises would be standing for long hours in freezing water, or leaning against a board and remaining completely still for long periods of time (O'Dwyer 1995:104).³⁰ Cuthbert, for instance, said his night offices up to his neck in water, although he did not force his monks to do likewise (Clarke 1929:93). It is important to note that the Celts did not despise the body, or see it as something to be punished in order to purify the soul, or as an obstacle to be overcome, as the Greek world view tended to do. Generally, the motivation behind Celtic spiritual disciplines was to strengthen themselves, to grow in holiness and effectiveness.

Exile from one's native land was frequently a punishment, either self-imposed or forced upon a penitent by church or civil authorities. A famous example of this was Columba's exile from Ireland, either a sentence imposed by the authorities, or a self-imposed punishment for his part in stirring up a civil war. Columba's exile led to the establishment of his community on Iona and the evangelistic activity which arose as a result in Scotland and Northern England (O'Flynn 1949:67). Patrick, too, left his native Britain involuntarily at first, when he was taken into slavery as a teenager. However, years later, after having escaped from Irish slavery, and having undergone training, he left for Ireland voluntarily, as a missionary (Curayne 1949:39). In many cases, the division between involuntary and voluntary travel becomes blurred or obliterated altogether.

Celtic spirituality distinguished three kinds of 'martyrdom'. There was *red martyrdom*, in the normal understanding of the shedding of one's blood for Christ's sake. In addition, there was *white martyrdom*, meaning living an ascetic life, which might involve exile or other practices designed to enhance and develop self-discipline. Finally, there was *green*

³⁰ There is even a legend of a Celtic saint, Coemgen of Glendalough, who stood still for so long that birds built a nest in his hands. He is then said to have remained motionless until the fledgling birds hatched and left the nest! (Condren 1989:102).

martyrdom, which meant living a life of penitence, and possibly travelling to another land to spread the gospel (Watkins 2002: 3).

The spiritual disciplines were seen, not only as punishments or as ‘subduing the flesh’, but as character and faith building practices. The contemporary church is beginning to see spiritual discipline in this light, as opposed to condemning these practises as misguided faults of a bygone age. Although the monks were celibate, the Celtic tradition did not exalt virginity as an ideal in the same way as the Latin monastic tradition³¹.

4.7.1. *Peregrinatio*

An outstanding feature of the lives of the Celtic saints was the practice of becoming a homeless wanderer. The term for this wandering is *Peregrinatio*, and it was understood as a penitential or disciplinary practice, which was undertaken for the sake of Christ. This involved leaving one’s home and loved ones either for life or for many years. O’ Fiaich (1995:103) describes the purpose of *peregrinatio* as follows: “The exodus of the Irish monks and scholars had little of the modern foreign missionary movement about it. For one thing, the primary motive was ascetical rather than evangelical.”

On the surface, this was certainly true. Although many of these people did not set out with the intention of becoming missionaries, or establishing monasteries, both evangelism and Christian expansions were often by-products of their actions. “The Celtic monk, even though he sought out ‘the desert’, could not refrain from converting the peasants to Christianity, and became a missionary in spite of himself” (Leclercq 1987: 170).

In a sense, a tension existed between the aim of *peregrinatio* as a form of self-discipline and the desire of the Celtic monks to evangelize those they met, and establish a beach-head for Christ wherever their travels led them. Therefore, the Celtic monks who undertook *peregrinatio* were responsible for evangelizing large areas of Europe, including France,

³¹ A story is told about Columba, that he persuaded a woman to live with her husband, rather than to join a “monastery of maidens”. She said to him “All things whatsoever thou shalt enjoin to me, though they be every so severe, I am prepared to fulfil, one thing only excepted ...I do not refuse to undertake all the management of the house; or even to cross the seas and remain in some monastery of maidens.” Columba suggested that the three of them fast for a day, and he then prayed all night. The next morning, the woman had a change of heart and agreed to live with her husband as his wife.

Belgium and Germany, where they “began to preach the gospel to their pagan neighbours and to Christians who had fallen into laxity and immorality” (O Fiaich 1995: 104).

Peregrinatio was seen as an ideal, to which members of the monastic communities aspired, and as the fulfilment of years of study and training: “When the monk had trained and strengthened his soul spiritually by study, tests and meditations, he could rise to a second stage of his life and take up a pilgrim’s staff as a missionary” (Streit 1984:152). It became a distinguishing feature of Celtic monasticism, and contributed greatly to the growth and extension of the Celtic church.

The Welsh nation was thoroughly Christianized in the fifth to seventh centuries, largely by the ‘Celtic saints’, pilgrims on *peregrinatio*, described by Williams as follows:

These enthusiastic, peripatetic evangelizers, mainly monks, were associated with a number of lands which then spoke Celtic languages – Ireland, western Scotland and the Isles, the Isle of Man, parts of northern England, Wales, Cornwall and Brittany...It was the impetus given by these monks as itinerant preachers and missionaries which did a great deal to extend and strengthen Christian belief and worship among the population. They not only inherited the existing Christian tradition but were candescently inspired by the infusion into their midst of the ascetic ideals of Eastern Christianity (Williams 1995:207).

Williams rightly emphasises the enthusiasm and dedication of wandering monks of this kind. Their success and the strength of the resulting churches was not the result of political, military or economic persuasion, but their enthusiasm was caught by those to whom they preached the gospel, resulting in a lasting impact on the lives of individuals and of nations.

Closely related to *peregrinatio* was an enthusiasm for pilgrimage to sacred places. In many cases, the two practices could not be distinguished, as pilgrimage was understood as ‘an ascetic exercise to part from home and friends for the love of Christ in order to bear witness to the Gospel values’ (O’Dwyer 1995:155). *Peregrinatio* was therefore not only a discipline, but a means of evangelism and church planting, on the one hand, and launching journeys of discovery, on the other.

Bradley (1999:189) believes that the custom of *peregrinatio* was a natural outgrowth of Celtic folklore, which set great store by journeys and exploration. This was continued in the Christian tradition of the Voyage of St. Brendon:

Celtic mythology was full of stories about journeys. Indeed, its literature contained two highly distinctive genres dealing with the subject matter – the *immrama* or tales of voyages and the *echtraí* which dealt specifically with adventures to the other world. In Celtic Christianity, too, the theme had been central, notably in the stress on the *peregrinatio* as both an inner and an outer experience, a reminder of the need not to become too attached to the things of this world, to travel through it as a pilgrim and a stranger and to concentrate on the journey to and beyond death (Bradley 1999:189).

Thus, the ancient Celts idealised journeys, and took delight in stories, told by travellers, of strange and beautiful places. This journey theme recurs often in both pagan and Christian Celtic oral tradition. This was connected to a tradition of welcoming travellers from far away places, in the hope that they would bring entertaining stories and useful information about their experiences, and those they had encountered:

The Celtic journey myth is typically dreamlike, an experience of intangible joy with fleeting images full of colour, jewelled trees, fabulous creatures, fantastic landscapes, sweet song and above all beautiful, every-youthful maidens and graceful goddesses (Ions 1997:146).

Those who were brought up hearing exciting and stimulating tales of far away places could not help but be drawn to travel, even if this eagerness was combined with a reluctance to leave a beloved home land, perhaps for ever.

4.8 Gender Relations

Celtic spirituality affirmed the feminine, and the equality of the genders and equal value of their contributions to both church and society. In this, the Celtic Christians have much to teach the church today. Jacobs (1999:1) states that “...much of Celtic art and literature is still imbued with a feminine quality and ...this may be an influence from pre-Christian Celtic culture.” The Celtic church was unique among its contemporaries in the early middle ages, in that the gifts and ministries of women were given official recognition.

Women enjoyed great freedom in Celtic societies generally, and were free to assume positions of political leadership. Mothers also had authority over their children, and were surprisingly warlike and committed to their clans and national groups. Among many Indo-European peoples, for example, there was a custom that the father should give the first food to a new born infant. In Ireland, the mother would feed the new born child on the point of his father's sword, expressing a wish that he would die only in battle (Pokorny 1997:67). In Ulster, it is still the custom that married women retain their maiden names, indicating a trace of early matriarchy, or at the least, a spirit of independence among women.

Cruden records the following examples of women who occupied positions of leadership among the pagan Celtic peoples:

In the Celtic world there were prophetesses; women healers, judges, and sages; women bards and satirists; priestesses and women who were warrior champions; Macha Mong Ruadh ruled Ireland from 377-331 BC; and Cartimandua headed the Brigantes tribe in Britain from A.D. 43-69. Celtic women were frequently ambassadors, making treaties and participating in assemblies. From A.D. 515-520, Roman bishops protested the Celtic church's inclusion of female authority and Welsh law drastically reduced women's rights by the tenth century A.D. (1998:137).

The Celts did not promote complete equality of genders, but they were remarkably open to women in leadership, especially by comparison with other peoples at the time. This openness was carried over into the Christian Church, with the result that the Celtic churches were noticeably more open to women's gifts than the church in the rest of Europe.

Some of the recognised female Celtic saints occupied positions of authority and leadership in their communities during their lives. An outstanding example is Hilda, who was the abbess at Whitby, and exercised leadership and spiritual direction over both women and men. Brigid, also, was recognised as a major leader in the Celtic church, and ruled over a double monastery, which included both men and women (Davies 1999:31). These women held positions of ecclesiastical and political influence, which was very unusual for women in early medieval Europe.

Another interesting aspect of Celtic spirituality is the institution of *conhospitae*. It seems that women who functioned as *conhospitae* were fully involved in a sacramental ministry, assisting priests in administering the eucharist. It is interesting that today, many women are involved in assisting with the sacraments of the church, and this is generally accepted without question. However, in the early middle ages, it was considered a dangerous heresy. Their participation was severely criticised by the authorities of the established church.

It seems that the Celtic churches did not actually ordain women priests, but allowed women to participate in a sacramental partnership with a priest, as *conhospitae*. In fact, the rules pertaining to ordination and sacramental celebration were less rigid in the Celtic churches than elsewhere, and this is found today, for example, in the Iona Community, where all are free to preside at the eucharist, even young children. However, it seems that even this step was the cause of scandal and mistrust of the Celtic tradition in the wider church.

The Celtic churches did not impose clerical celibacy until much later than the wider church. Condren sees imposed celibacy of priests as a way of entrenching male power and dominance over women and over the power of reproduction : “The institution of compulsory clerical celibacy generated powerful symbolic capital that could be drawn upon to sustain the superiority of the spiritual and temporal empires to which men gave birth” (1989:146). Thus, not only were women subjugated, their sexuality was despised and they were considered unclean because of their association with giving birth and reproduction. Condren concludes that women’s life-giving power was replaced by men’s power to take life through killing and sacrifice. This has limited truth, but from a Christian perspective, Christ’s sacrifice is seen as bringing life out of death, not as merely a focus on death.

In many cases the daughters as well as the sons of Celtic kings and noblemen were sent to monasteries to be educated. This would apply especially to girls who were destined to become nuns, because they would then have to read the psalms (Gougaud 1992:249).³²

³² An interesting character named Aed ran a school with boy and girl pupils, and insisted on shaving the heads of all his scholars. His eccentricities led to his banishment from Ireland.

The issue of gender in Celtic spirituality and its relevance for the church today will be further discussed in Chapter Six.

4.9 The Celtic Emphasis on Peace

The Celtic symbol for the Holy Spirit is a wild goose, a female symbol, which is often connected with motherhood. This bird was chosen because ‘she represents purity, strength, grace and a deep nurturing care for her young’ (Jacobs 1999:2). The wild goose is caring and protective, but also strong and beyond human control. It is not a tamed animal. In the same way, peace is understood as a gift from God, which can be worked for and appreciated, but cannot be created by human effort. Peace, in the sense of harmony with creation and with fellow beings, humans, animals, plants or spirits, is highly desirable in Celtic tradition. Celtic literature includes several prayers for peace, or thanksgivings for peace, both at national and personal levels.

A concern for peace, justice and the equality of all people pervades Celtic literature and art. Peace is an important theme in Celtic songs and blessings, and this has added to their popularity among contemporary Westerners, facing a future filled with uncertainty and disruption. Many of the Celtic poems and prayers contain this longing for harmony and holism.

A well known example of such a blessing is:

May the road always rise to meet you
May the wind be always at your back
May the sun shine warm upon your face
May the rain fall soft upon your back
And until we meet again,
May the Good Lord hold you soft in the hollow of his hand (Scott
1999: 72).

This is popular because of the beautiful imagery, reminding one of travelling through picturesque countryside, and also because it expresses the hope of God’s protection and guidance in uncertain circumstances. There is a rejoicing in the beauty of nature, and also a confidence in God’s goodness and love, which is a prominent characteristic of Celtic spirituality.

Celtic proverbs often express the desire for harmony, especially between people and between families. This thought is expressed in the following cryptically worded toast:

This is for you and yours
And for mine and ours.
And if mine and ours
Ever come across you and yours,
I pray that you and yours will do
As much for mine and ours
As mine and ours have done
For you and yours (Scott 1999:70).

Peace is not simply the absence of hostility, but a positive co-operation for a common end. This toast reflects a typically Celtic identification with family and friends, and a sense of community, as well as a consciousness of human responsibility for maintaining community.

The following proverb illustrates the value given to peace in Celtic thought and culture:

This is my prayer:
That there should be peace between neighbours,
That there should be peace between kin
That there should be peace between lovers
That there should be peace within and without (Scott 1999:87)

Peace was something to be worked and prayed for, not assumed or taken for granted. The warlike nature of many Celtic cultures may have led to a paradoxical longing for peace, especially within families and communities, where disharmony could be disastrous, and could ultimately lead to the annihilation of a family, clan or whole village.

4.10 Art and Literature

The ancient Celts took pride in their visual arts, music and poetry. Their distinctive art forms were used as religious symbols from the earliest times. “Religion and art were inseparably entwined in the culture of the Celtic peoples. In both pagan and Christian times, the Celts expressed supernatural beliefs in their art” (Richardson 1995:359).

The abstract or concrete representations of natural objects and creatures in Celtic art are often more meaningful to the contemporary viewer than art forms of the more recent past (Richardson 1995:360). Distinctive features of Celtic art include the use of spirals, figures of humans and animals, often intertwined, and ornate lettering, which often used gold leaf.

Spirals are often endless, with the end coming back to the starting point. These art forms came to represent eternity:

The Celts were fascinated by the image of the endless knot – a way to express this infinity in a tangible pattern. The lines in knotwork on monuments and in manuscripts twist and turn, but always return to the starting point. In narratives of Otherworld journeys too, travellers have a wealth of experiences but eventually arrive back where they began. Viewed in this unworldly perspective, death is not an ending, but a doorway to eternal life (Wood 2000:125).

The interesting visual forms and intertwined shapes used by Celtic artists reflect the Celtic appreciation for mystery and paradox, an attitude of wonder at the mysterious character of the world, which does not automatically lead the observer to analyse what he sees. Sandison (1998:51) describes the dominant motifs of Celtic art: “triskeles³³ and spirals, the resolute avoidance of copying images from real life, and the continued inclusion of sinuous, distorted animal symbols and elusive human heads”. Sandison is probably correct in seeing these designs as a deliberate choice of style, reflecting a love of mystery and paradox.

There are some forms which occur more frequently, especially animals which played an important role in Celtic societies, such as dogs, horses, and deer and wild birds, which were hunted. Plants which were well known to the Celts also often appear in their drawings and sculptures. The grape vine would be an obvious example.

The vine has an important symbolic value in Celtic Christian art, where it represents the wine in the communion service. “The grape-laden vine that sprouts from a chalice represents Christ’s promise of redemption; and the peacocks, depicted with their colourful tail feathers open, denote the Resurrection” (Wood 2000:128). Both the depictions of the laden grape vine and of the peacock show an appreciation for nature, and rejoicing in its beauty, which was carried into Christian worship. However, it is important to note that the Christian Celts did not worship nature, but saw nature as reflecting and illustrating the glory of God. Celtic artistic development was the result of “the union of a great artistic pagan tradition with the desire to celebrate a new creed with a flood of fresh creativity which could capture and reflect all their love and reverence” (Sandison 1998:51).

³³ A *triskele* is a pattern of three swirls, joined in the centre, and is a common component of Celtic art works, described by Sandison (1998:39) as a “three-armed whirling motif”.

The Celtic cross, with a circle super-imposed on the cross, plays an important role in Celtic Christian art, and has become a popular symbol among contemporary Christians. The circle was probably originally a symbol for the sun, and associated with the worship of *Lugh* the sun god, which was so prominent in pagan Celtic religion. Among Christians it is sometimes interpreted as a symbol of eternity or of the resurrection, “as a victory wreath, proof perhaps of Christ’s defeat of death itself through his resurrection” (Sandison 1998:50).

In Wales and Ireland especially, Christian art, literature and scholarship was bound up with the monastic communities, which “became not only the foci of pastoral and missionary work, but also centres of learning, the arts and education” (Walker 1992:222). The majority of people with education were taught in the monasteries. The monasteries also played an important role in preserving education and the arts while Europe was overrun by Vikings and other peoples who had little time for art and literature.

Oral literature³⁴ was a feature of Celtic society and religion from the earliest times, and Celtic societies always had a deep respect for literature and poetry, even if this was predominantly in oral form.

Three professional classes guided Celtic culture. The bards or poets sang or chanted elaborate story-songs that told the whole story of the Celtic people. The vates or prophets were said to see the future. The druids, a priesthood of men and women, cultivated mystical wisdom and served as judges and counselors to the Celtic kings (Paul 1998: 9).

Both pagan and Christian Celtic peoples produced poetry and other literature, which was largely oral and passed on to the next generation by means of story telling, memorising and repetition. Celtic bards were subjected to a rigorous and long period of training, during which a vast repertoire of oral literature had to be learned by heart³⁵.

³⁴ The term ‘literature’ is used here in a broad sense of a collection of poems, stories, proverbs, songs, which may exist in written form, or may be orally preserved. The term respects oral literature, and makes it equivalent in value to written literature.

³⁵ Carr-Gomm (2002:58) records the following information about the training of Bards in Ireland, which lasted twelve years:

“in the first year, the student progressed from Principle Beginner (Ollaire) to Poet’s Attendant (Tamhan) to Apprentice Satirist (Drisac). During this time they had to learn the basics of the bardic arts: grammar, twenty stories and the Ogham tree alphabet. Over the next four years, they learned a further ten stories each year, a

Druid literature was almost entirely oral, as it was felt that their teaching would be devalued by making written records. Where literature was produced, it was in Greek, which would not be understood by ordinary, uneducated people. This is one reason why the period of training for new Druids lasted twenty years. This lengthy time period was necessary to master the wealth of oral wisdom which had to be passed on to new initiates, as recorded in Caesar's *De Bello Gallico*(VI: xiv) (Irvine 1970: 79). The apprenticeship method of training new druids was also more intimate and personal than the more common modern method of book learning, with little or no personal contact with the teacher. Learners either study written materials alone, or have limited interaction with a teacher, who is dealing with several other learners at the same time. The druids' training methods allowed for a lengthy time of one on one learning.

The poets came to occupy a position in Celtic lands which was far greater than in other parts of Europe, where 'the role of the vernacular poet was generally suspect and marginal, lying on the periphery of Latin ecclesiastical culture' (Davies 1999:40). Where local poetry persisted in other parts of Europe, the poets operated independently of the church, whereas among the Celts, the poets were closely aligned with the monastic movement. Thus, the Celtic church operated as a patron of the arts, and a preserver of learning.

The poets in pagan Celtic societies occupied a high status, as attested by ancient laws of both Ireland and Wales:

The *ollam* or highest grade of Irish poet enjoyed a status in law equal to that of a bishop or a petty king, and in Wales, the *pencerdd* was similarly honored. Moreover, the medieval Celtic bard was not only the eulogiser of kings, but also genealogist and preserver of tribal law and cosmology (Davies 1999:40).

In addition, after these societies came under Christian and monastic influence, the poets increasingly took on the roles and status of the druids.

hundred Ogham combinations, a dozen philosophy lessons, and an unspecified number of poems. They also studied diphthongal combinations, the Law of Privileges and the uses of grammar. By the sixth year, any students who had stayed the course was called a Pillar (Cli) and would study a further forty-eight poems and twenty more stories. Over the following three years, the Pillars were termed Noble Streams (Anruth). As Anruth, they learned another ninety-five tales, bringing their repertoire up to 175. After another three years, they became Ollamh or Doctors of Poetry. In the tenth year, they had to study a hundred poems and in the twelfth year they had to study one hundred and twenty orations and "the four arts of poetry".

It is interesting that Christ is always portrayed as risen and victorious on Irish crosses, not as the suffering, crucified Christ (Streit 1984:142). This shows that Celtic art and spirituality was more life-affirming and positive in its approach than much contemporary art.

4.11 The Trinity in Celtic Tradition

An interesting aspect of early Celtic thought is the readiness with which the Celts accepted the Christian doctrine of the Trinity (Davies 1999:11). Part of the reason for this is because the number three held an important place in their traditions, and it was relatively easy to Christianise these traditions by relating them to the Doctrine of the Trinity. For example, the Celtic tradition included a goddess with three names, *Banba*, *Fodla* and *Eriu*. *Morrigan*, the goddess of war is also grouped with two sisters, *Babd* the crow and *Nemain*, meaning panic (Scott 1999:17) Many Celtic gods had three aspects to their nature, the soul was pictured as a triple spiral, and “Also triple were the ‘releases’ of grief, joy, and repose that restored the soul; these were often embodied in Celtic stories by three harp notes or three bird songs” (Cruden 1998:83).

The Doctrine of the Trinity is widely considered a most difficult doctrine, which has been a stumbling block to many past and present believers. Yet it seems to have been universally accepted and welcomed by the Celtic Christians, principally because it was seen as a fulfillment of their existing religious traditions. The Celtic churches also had a strong emphasis on the Incarnation of Christ (Davies 1999:11), which, of course, is inextricably inter-twined with the Doctrine of the Trinity.

Thus, in Celtic poetry, proverbs are commonly arranged in threes (known as triads), for example:

There are three things that make a fool wise
Learning
Application and
Patience.

And there are three things that make a wise man foolish
Quarrelling
Rage and
Drunkenness (Scott 1999:20-21).

Three things it is best to do quickly:
Catch a flea as soon as you feel it
Avoid the path of a mad dog;
Soothe contention

The three fountains of knowledge:
Thought;
Intuition;
Learning.

The three functions of speech:
To recite;
To argue;
And to tell a story.

Three times for a fool's laughter:
At what is good;
At what is bad;
And at what he cannot understand.

Three kinds of men are there:
Men of God who return good for evil,
Men of this world who give good for good and evil for evil,
And the Devil's men who repay good with evil (Wood 2000:115).

This practice of grouping concepts in threes may have been a device to make learning easier, principally in an oral framework. The triad format is entertaining, but often expresses a hidden truth. In Celtic tradition, questions are asked three times and stone figures of little hooded men who bring good luck are always in groups of three. The number three was used to represent wholeness or comprehensiveness, and to intensify power. A common Celtic artistic device was to portray three faces intertwined, so that they effectively became one. Three faces were understood to be looking at the past, the present and the future all at once (Wood 2000:114).

The triple spiral was an important and widespread visual symbol which “represented the cycle of birth, life and death; the Maiden, Mother and Crone; the never-ending cycle of infinitude” (Condren 1989:25). Triple spirals are carved on many pre-Christian stone monuments in Ireland, for example, at Newgrange, near Drogheda in the Boyne Valley.

According to Diogenes, the ancient druids taught their oral tradition in groups of three mysteries (Scott 1999:18). This was partly a mnemonic device, essential where learning is

primarily oral, but a triad, a group of three concepts or phenomena, was symbolic of the sacred among the ancient Celtic peoples (Wood 2000:29). The number three also recurs frequently in Celtic art and designs. There are several traditional sayings and proverbs, known as triads, “which are pithy wisdom-sayings based originally on Druid lore” (Carr-Gomm 2002:19), and which all have three parts. For example:

Know that there are three candles that illuminate every
darkness:
Truth,
Nature and
Knowledge (Scott 1999:23).

Streit (1984: 65) describes the pre-Christian Celtic ‘trinity’ as follows:

In Ireland Tanaros was worshipped as God the Father. God the Son, Lugh (god of light, also called Beli) was at the same time god of fire because fire to the Irish is the earthly likeness of the sun. The third god was the divine virgin Brigantia (Brigit). This triple form indicates an affinity with the Christian Trinity. Celtic culture in its highest religious expression approached close to Christianity.

The figure of Brigid is particularly interesting, because this was also the name of one of the most significant and influential of the early Celtic saints, who also became identified in the popular mind with Mary, the mother of Christ, as such, she was known as ‘the Mary of the Gaels’ (Davies 1999:32). Undoubtedly, many traditions which were originally associated with the pagan goddess Brigit came to be applied to the Christian saint.

The following description of a vision seen of Brigid, is found in a manuscript in the Library of Ireland, and is quoted in detail below:

The Three Brigids guard the entrance to the land of the gods. This entrance consists of three gateways, formed of heavy beams of wood, inlaid with small ornaments of silver and brass.

Brigid the Smith worker stands strong and alert at the left-hand gate. She is very dark, with black, wiry hair and restless black eyes. Her tunic is of blue and purple, her bratta is purple, and a bronze brooch clasps her bratta; and on her head is a bronze band; beaten bronze-work ornaments her leather belt and sandals. She governs all handiworks and represents the hard, laborious and painful side of life.

Brigid of Medicine stands at the right-hand gate. She has a fair and gentle face; her robes are light blue, embroidered with silver thread, clasped by a silver winged brooch; another winged ornament rests

on her head. She represents the happy, sympathetic side of life, and so becomes the healer of that which is bruised and broken by the hammer of Brigid of Smithwork.

Brigid of Poetry stands over the central gateway. Her robes are more sombre and cloudy. They are of a dull blue-grey and white; her face is neither fair or dark, she has soft blue eyes, which sadly look out upon the world, feeling the joys and sorrows that work therein. She combines the forces of the other two, being both active and passive, receptive of impressions, and possessing the power of producing form ... While she rests, vegetation grows; she blows the blast from her trumpet during the dead months of winter. The waves of the sea flow towards her when she is at rest, and are driven back when she becomes active (quoted in Murray 1997:352).

The Celtic mind was at home with paradox, and therefore able to accept the idea of God being simultaneously one and three, as a mystery to which one responds with wonder and awe, rather than a theological conundrum to be dissected in the halls of academia. God's threefold nature was a comfort to them, and frequently prayers for protection are addressed to all three of the persons of the Trinity. An example, from the *Carmina Gaelica* of Alexander Carmichael, and quoted by Simpson (1995:118-119) is quoted below:

The Three who are over my head,
The Three who are under my tread,
The Three who are over me here,
The Three who are over me there.
The Three who are in the earth near,
The Three who are up in the air,
The Three who in heaven do dwell,
The Three in the great ocean swell,
Pervading Three, O be with me.

The Three be about your head
The Three be about your breast.
The Three be about your body,
Each night and each day,
In the encompassment of the Three
Throughout your life long.

I lie down tonight
With the Triune of my strength,
With the Father, with Jesus,
With the Spirit of might.

The ancient Celtic churches were theologically orthodox, differing from their Roman counterparts only in organisational structures and relatively minor points of controversy, such as the date on which Easter should be celebrated, and the dress and hairstyle of monks. Celtic monks shaved their heads across from ear to ear, and wore the rest of the hair long, in the manner of initiated druids (Simpson 1995:58). The issue of the unity of the church, and particularly of the authority of the clergy sent from Rome over the indigenous Celtic clergy was settled at the Synod of Whitby in 664 CE. Both sides of the dispute gathered and argued their case. King Oswin ruled in favour of the Roman party, and the authority of the pope was accepted in the rest of England. Northern Ireland came under the control of the Roman Church in 696 CE, Scotland in 716 CE and Wales in 755 CE (Simpson 1995:xii).

The Trinity is one controversial doctrine which was always accepted by the Celts, and any view of the Celtic tradition must bear this in mind. It is therefore important to emphasise the trinitarian nature of Celtic doctrine, in the face of much of the literature generated by the New Age movement (Davies 1999:8), which assumes that the doctrine of the Trinity, and the related doctrine of the Incarnation of Christ, was foreign to the Celtic mind.

Patrick, in one of his extant works, the *Confessions*, gives a full statement of the Doctrine of the Trinity as taught and believed by the Celtic churches:

For there is not, nor ever was, any other God – there was none before him and there shall not be any after him – besides him who is God the Father unbegotten: without a source, from him everything else takes its beginning. He is, as we say, the one who keeps hold of all things. And his Son, Jesus Christ, whom we profess to have always existed with the Father. He was spiritually with the Father before the world came into being.; begotten of the Father before the beginning of anything in a way that is beyond our speech. And through him all things were made, things visible and invisible. He was made man, and having conquered death was taken back into the heavens to the Father. And the Father has bestowed on him all power above every name in heaven and on earth and under the earth, so that every tongue may confess that our Lord and God is Jesus Christ in whom we believe. And we look forward to his coming, in the time that is soon to be, when he will be judge of the living and the dead, “who will repay each one according to his works”. And the Father has plentifully poured upon us the Holy Spirit, “the gift and pledge of immortality, who

makes those who believe and listen into 'sons of God'³⁶ the Father 'and fellow heirs with Christ'. This is who we confess and adore, One God in Trinity of sacred name. (Quoted in Davies 1999:68).

It is clear that these words reflect a high Christology and an orthodox doctrine of the Trinity, compatible with the Nicene Creed. There is no suggestion that Christ or the Holy Spirit is less than God, or that either is a separate god. Christ is presented as co-creator with the Father, the ruler over all creation and the promised judge who will return. The Holy Spirit is a gift of God the Father given to those who believe in Christ. There is nothing in the writings of Patrick to support the claims of New Age zealots with regard to Celtic belief and spirituality, that Celtic spirituality was not entirely Christian.

4.12 Conclusion

A study of the traditions, beliefs and practices of the early Celtic Church reveals a number of interesting relics of pre-Christian religion and culture which have been, seemingly effortlessly, combined with the Christian gospel, to form a tradition which was both Celtic and Christian. For example, Celtic love of story telling, song and adventure became integral to the fledgling church. The Celtic value of living in harmony with the natural world became part of their distinctive Christian tradition, as did their highly developed sense of community. Many parallel aspects of African tradition could have been harnessed by the early Western missionaries, but instead were ignored or disparaged. Examples would be African story telling, dance and artistic and musical styles. This will be further discussed in Chapter Five. It is hoped that the church of the twenty-first century can learn from our forbears in Britain and Ireland, in order to create a truly contextual theology and spirituality for our times.

An interesting aspect of the legacy of Celtic Christianity to later ages of the church is the contribution of scholars and philosophers who are not readily recognised as being Celts, but who nonetheless were formed by a Celtic heritage, and contributed to Celtic thought themselves. The clearest example is Pelagius, condemned as a heretic by his own contemporaries, but increasingly recognised as a great Christian thinker. For many people today, the fact that much of the Celtic Christian heritage has been hidden is a tragedy.

³⁶ The text within inverted commas is quoted directly from Scripture. Patrick's *Confessions* contains numerous direct quotations of this kind.

However, clearly each age discovers which elements of tradition are helpful to its people. The contemporary church must discover for itself how it can learn from the Celtic tradition, in order to enrich the lives of its people, and make them more effective in the world.

The next chapter will examine African Spirituality in detail, and this will be followed by a comparison between Celtic and African Spirituality, concentrating on their unique contributions to the contemporary Church and Christian spirituality. In particular, the areas of attitude to the environment, oral and symbolic communication and the place of women in the church will be discussed.