

## THE CELTIC BECOMING: PRELUDE TO A NEW BELIEVING<sup>1</sup>

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ABSTRACT: Today's ongoing colloquy of ideas about the nature of being, in which a broadening array of scientists, philosophers, and historians of religion are participating, echoes some of the keynotes of spiritual practice in a much earlier period, in the 6th and 7th centuries. That was an era when Celtic monasticism, operating on the northwest edge of Europe, developed a simple but prescient ontology that was echoed in many later periods. Aldous Huxley maintained that a unified "perennial philosophy" could be found within the base-line metaphysics of all the great axial religions. It may not be ironic that science is the draught horse now pulling truth from a new intersection of these ideas.

KEYWORDS: Enlarging of mind; Causal spirit; Living in the truth; Modality of rising forth; Ascesis; A "nothing reserved for everything"

### THE REAL WORLD

The Nobel Prize-winning poet Czeslaw Milosz, in his book *Visions from San Francisco Bay*, pondered the future of faith during a scientific age. He noted that piety "persists independently of the division of people into believers and atheists, an illusory division today, since faith is undermined by disbelief in faith, and disbelief by disbelief in itself. The sacred exists and is stronger than all our rebellions." Milosz argued further that "the new" meant "space-creating movement" – and that such movement, "the destroyer of hierarchy, reveals talents which its enemies, who defend the hierarchy at any cost, never suspected." (1)

Every new movement, whether political, scientific or religious, derives from thought, or more specifically, from declining satisfaction with existing thought. After the collapse of the

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Roman Empire left the peoples on its periphery to their own devices, the Celts who lived in what is now Ireland were won over by the figure and mind of St. Patrick. He had led what until that time was the only nonviolent religious conversion of a European people -- a precedent that needs a better understanding, given the global persistence in the ensuing fifteen centuries of violence as a means of intimidating opponents.

In his *Cosmos and History* article headlined, "Celtic Devotion," Sean O Nualláin invites us to consider whether the time has arrived to propose a new religion, defining the latter as one of the "societal manifestations of a shared experience of the sacred." (2) Every society relies on ideas that purport to have explanatory power and that also frame its values. But such a system is reliant on widespread believing in its content, for its credibility to be acknowledged. The experience of believing is often underpinned subjectively and grounded in the desire for meaning. This may have been easier to inspire at a time when the material world was simpler and less narcotic in its inventions and diversions.

Zealotry in contending schools of thought is nevertheless as common now as ever. Martin Heidegger argued that "the world of self-assertion, which seeks to know all, and discounts what is unknowable as non-existent – this world in which modern man almost wholly resides – is not the *real* world, which is altogether other and elsewhere." (3) If being is not explicable within our present paradigm of knowledge, then a larger scope of understanding is necessary.

In the century following St. Patrick, a monk in Ireland named Columba and a band of fellow monks were banished—after a local disagreement -- to the land of the Picts, in what is now Scotland. Columba chose the austere but tawny island of Iona as his redoubt, and there he incubated a different consciousness about nature, distance and power. Adomnan, his biographer a century later, said that Columba's fellow monks realized he was often aware of events far away as they happened, an experience Columba described as an "enlarging of mind". Adomnan and others had seen Columba calm storms and perform healings, yet they did not understand the cognitive ability that he appeared to be using. (4)

Columba, however, was not a mystic. He was a practical organizer, establishing over 300 monasteries and outposts throughout the lands to the north and west of Iona. He was, inevitably, a model for the expanded cohort of peregrinating Celtic monks who fanned out across Europe in the next centuries and established a number of monasteries that later became universities. Yet for long periods he was also an anchorite on Iona, reading and meditating in tiny caves that faced the wind of the western sea.

At a time when the world's population was less than three percent of what it is today, Columba was free of constables, credit limits, and the trappings of dogma. His only surviving piece of writing includes this description of the causal spirit that he saw everywhere: "The high first-sower, the ancient of days, and unbegotten, was without any source, limit, or foundation in the beginning, and is and will be throughout unending ages..." (5) That reassurance gave him the security to build a movement for a new framework of thought in a wild and windswept land.

## LOGOS AND LIVING

As did many other spiritually-minded monks who followed Jesus of Nazareth in the first millennium, Columba would have accepted the word of St. John the Beloved Disciple, who summed up the message of Jesus in this statement: “God is light, and in him is no darkness at all.” This was a counter-intuitive disavowal of the primacy of matter, not dissimilar to the earlier Abhidharma Buddhist concept of “*pannindriya*”, which emphasized cultivating a “field of understanding” in order to grasp That Which Is. (6)

St. John began his eyewitness chronicle of Jesus with this line: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.” When John taught this in Ephesus in the last two decades of the first century, there were seven different meanings of the Greek word *logos* (meaning “Word”). One of them was “field of understanding.” Columba would have naturally assumed when he arrived on Iona that his new dispensation was a similar field, for practicing what he had developed in thought. The content of this *logos* was not produced by theological debates of the kind which clogged the discourse of medieval and modern theologians. It came to mind through listening, and by prompting the mind’s engine to keep looking over the hedges of convenient doctrine.

To work on such a frontier of understanding would have thrilled the 20<sup>th</sup> century philosopher Richard Rorty, who maintained that “imagination, rather than argument, was the principal means by which humanity makes progress.” Rorty said that “imagination is what gives us new topics to talk about – topics like ‘democracy’, ‘gravity’ and ‘curved space-time.’ It enlarges the bounds of conversation and inquiry. It is a mistake to speak of ‘the aesthetic realm’ as if that were a corral to which the imagination is confined. The imagination permeates all areas of culture, and keeps it moving.” (7)

Imagination also manifests freedom. So it is not coincidental that the growing dialogue spurred by the Foundations of Mind organization found initial impetus in the San Francisco Bay area. Czeslaw Milosz celebrated what he called the area’s “Bohemia”, including its cenobites in Big Sur such as Henry Miller, whose “volcanic roar, indifferent to all authority” he found “dazzling”. Neutralizing the resistance to truth is something that all figures who want to refound our frame of reference have had to do. They have to operate on what Vaclav Havel, the great Czech dissident playwright, called “a different level altogether: the level of human consciousness and conscience, the existential level.” (8)

To develop that level of understanding, Havel said, required “living in the truth” – as Columba had had to do in the 6<sup>th</sup> century. Havel described it this way: “What else are those initial attempts at social self-organization than the efforts of a certain part of society to live...within the truth, to rid itself of the self-sustaining aspects of totalitarianism...What else is it but a nonviolent attempt by people to negate the system within themselves and to establish their lives on a new basis, that of their own proper identity?”

## A NEW AGENCY

The truth that Columba sought had impelled his colonizing of a new land, where the warmth

of the gulf stream refreshed cold Iona and seemed itself to be a kind of truth. It was not unlike what Soren Kierkegaard sought, as he rejected the static theories that circumscribed thought in his part of northern Europe, more than a thousand years later. “There is always movement in Truth,” Kierkegaard argued, “there is never-ceasing Becoming or Coming into Being. For Truth moves and grows...It is a living process.” (9) This betokened an alternative ethic in developing viable explanations of the basis of reality -- not to legitimize a new form of political or material power, but to navigate a deeper river of reason. As Pascal said, “The heart has its reasons which reason does not know.”

Columba did not only seek an understanding of *logos* for the new Celtic lands that he aimed to reform, he also hoped to re-sew the fabric of the human communities he found. As a witness in the Celtic homeland to a violent conflict which he had done nothing to stop, he accepted the isolation of Iona initially as an act of penance – and then found himself laying the foundation for a fresh content of believing, to heal living in the human fold. As the modern physicist Henry Stapp has put it: “...we are not the helpless witnesses that classical mechanics claimed us to be, but are, instead, causally effective agents in the creation of an evolving reality.” (10)

#### RESERVED FOR EVERYTHING

Columba was a magnet for animals. Seabirds, sea lions and other creatures of the Celtic isles sought him out continually. His receptivity was part of it, but the Berkeley philosopher Alva Noe has a clue to what was going on: “...once you see an organism as a unity, as more than just a process, you are, in effect, recognizing its primitive agency, its possession of interests, needs, and point of view. That is, you are recognizing its...incipient mindfulness.” Whatever Columba and his animals were transacting, it was neither material nor encoded in language. (11)

The physicist Erwin Schrodinger said that the Greek philosopher Parmenides did not “take the material world around us as a granted reality. The true reality he puts into thought, into the subject of cognizance, as we should say.” And the world itself is “an image created...by way of belief.” (12) When the Takacs Quartet played Beethoven’s A Minor Quartet (the “Heiliger Dankgesang”) at Queens Hall in Edinburgh, the quartet’s leader said later: “We were taken far out of ourselves, liberated from the confines of individual personalities as we surrendered to the music...Above all this is why we play string quartets, weathering the sometimes fragile nature of our dependent relationships to enjoy such concert experiences that reaffirm the leap of faith we have made in each other.” (13)

The Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben finds a basis for the experience of being “taken far out of ourselves” in the “modality of rising forth” by a “being that is its own mode of being”, and he cites Plotinus as noting that “this kind of being...makes use of itself as it is,” and should be thought of as a “habitus, an ethos.” (14) Much the same thought is expressed by Seán Ó Nualláin when he notes that the “ascesis involved in emptying the self leads to the same point as total giving of oneself...” (15)

True identity is the norm that is within us, as is the content of our believing which we wish

to share with others. So too is the pole of our outer unfoldment that gives us space. In his Pulitzer Prize-winning novel “Humboldt’s Gift”, Saul Bellow said that “at the center of the beholder there must be space for the whole, and this nothing-space is not an empty nothing but a nothing reserved for everything.”

It is not an overstatement that there have been few historical moments when everything we know as civilization has been at stake, yet that is true today. Columba stood on a promontory that gave him meager resources but limitless range, of which he took full advantage. Today we are accosted by a cacophony of daily voices that exercise ego and starve the truth – but none of that is unprecedented. What is without precedent is the number of human beings who are ready to believe that our “bonds of affection” and “the better angels of our nature” can yet find and expand a new territory of reason and truth. It is already on the doorstep of our consciousness.

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