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REIMAGINING CELTIC CHRISTIANITY
HISTORICAL ROOTS AND MODERN SPIRITUAL REVIVAL

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Abstract
This study examines the complex phenomenon of Celtic Christianity, tracing its origins from early medieval religious expressions in Ireland and Scotland through its reinterpretation in modern spiritual movements. It highlights the romanticized and often idealised narratives surrounding Celtic saints and practices, emphasising that primary sources like hagiographies are malleable cultural texts rather than fixed historical records. The research explores how these flexible narratives underpin the identity and spirituality of contemporary neo-Celtic Christian communities, especially within charismatic Anglican circles. Ultimately, the Celtic Christian revival is presented not as a straightforward historical recovery but as a creative spiritual reinvention, resonating with modern seekers searching for authenticity, ecological connection, and mystical meaning.

Keywords: *Celtic Christianity, Regional Religious Diversity, Cultural Identity, Ecological Spirituality, Contemporary Spirituality*

Introduction
The term "Celtic Christianity" is both widely used and deeply contested. While often invoking romanticised images of nature-attuned monks and saints in harmony with pagan traditions, it encompasses a historically complex set of religious developments. Scholars continue to debate whether there ever was a coherent, distinct "Celtic Church," or simply diverse, localised expressions of Roman Christianity adapted to regional cultures. This tension between historical unity and regional variation is key to understanding the movement's modern reinterpretations.

This paper explores both the historical and mythological foundations of Celtic Christianity and its reimagining in contemporary contexts. Blending historical analysis with cultural critique, it emphasises that these texts and traditions are not static historical accounts but flexible cultural artifacts. These narratives have become vital to the self-definition of modern neo-Celtic Christian communities, shaping both their spiritual practices and identities.

This study outlines Celtic Christianity in two interrelated ways: first, as the early medieval Christian traditions of Ireland and Scotland (fifth–tenth centuries); and second, as their contemporary revival through neo-Celtic Christian communities. These modern movements selectively draw on hagiography, folklore, and monastic ideals to construct a spiritually resonant, ecologically attuned, and often counter-institutional form of Christian practice. Rooted in the broader romanticising "Celticism" movement that emerged in the eighteenth century across Ireland, Scotland, and beyond, these communities engage in a cultural reimagining that idealises the Celtic past—particularly its oral traditions, which were only recorded centuries later by monks and

are seen as symbols of intuitive, embodied wisdom. This creates a tradition that balances elusive oral memories with the historical record, resulting in an inherently ambiguous narrative ripe for modern reinterpretation.

Historical Context and Regional Diversity of Early Celtic Christianity

The establishment of early Christian traditions in Ireland, Scotland, and neighboring Celtic-speaking regions unfolded between the fifth and tenth centuries. This development was shaped by Irish, British, and continental European missionaries whose efforts forged religious cultures rooted in both Roman Christianity and local customs (Meek, 2000: 142). One of the earliest attestations to Irish Christianity appears in a mid-fifth-century chronicle referencing Bishop Palladius, sent by Pope Celestine "to the Irish believing in Christ" (Charles-Edwards, 2000: 205). However, it was the arrival of Saint Patrick in 432 AD that catalysed the widespread adoption of Christian doctrine in Ireland, laying the groundwork for a distinctive Irish Christian culture blending Roman faith with native social and symbolic frameworks.

Patrick's mission sought to integrate Christian teachings into indigenous customs, supporting existing social structures (Ó hÓgáin, 1999: 201). Yet early interactions were complex and sometimes fraught, reflecting Ireland's relative isolation from broader European ecclesiastical developments (Meek, 2000: 142–143). Notably, Saint Patrick's *Confessio*—the only surviving autobiographical text among all early saints—reveals a defensive tone, depicting Ireland as beset by paganism and hostility (Bradley, 1999: 12). By the eighth century, however, Christianity had become largely assimilated into Irish society (Bergholm, 2012: 128), aided by Rome's strategic policy of adapting rather than eradicating local traditions—captured in Pope Gregory I's advice to convert pagan temples into Christian sites and repurpose local feasts to honor saints.

Despite its integration with Roman Christianity, the Irish Church retained distinctive characteristics, including a central role for monasticism, penitential rigor, voluntary exile, a divergent method of Easter calculation, and missionary zeal, vividly reflected in the lives of its saints (Etchingham, 1999). Monastic practices drew on Roman and British models but were deeply infused with indigenous ascetic traditions.

These features did not develop in isolation; they were shaped and reinforced by ongoing interaction with neighboring Christian communities across the Irish Sea. Between 600 and 1100, Christianity across Ireland, Scotland, and Wales was marked by sustained connections across the Irish Sea. While Ireland and Scotland shared a common Gaelic vernacular, linguistic links with Wales and Cumbria were either weaker or not historically recognised. Despite these variations, these churches maintained enduring ties. However, rather than constituting a unified "Celtic Church," they formed a network of distinct but interrelated communities. Latin remained the primary language of ecclesiastical communication, allowing Christianity to transcend local vernaculars and spread even into non-Celtic-speaking areas.

At the heart of this network stood Ireland, which by the early medieval period had become the region's most culturally vibrant and ecclesiastically influential center. Irish churches shaped neighboring traditions and reached into continental Europe. Even into the eleventh century, many of these churches retained distinctive practices and remained largely unaffected by the Benedictine reforms sweeping other parts of Europe. Thinking in terms of a Christianity centered around the Irish Sea—rather than a monolithic Celtic Christianity—better captures the diversity and vitality of these regional expressions of faith (Charles-Edwards, 2008: 105–106).

The Irish *Vitae Sanctorum*

The *Vitae Sanctorum* (sing. *Vita Sancti*), or "Saints' Lives", are hagiographic texts mostly composed from the late 7th century onward, that recount the deeds of early Irish saints from the fifth and sixth centuries. Written in both Latin and Gaelic, often by monastic clergy, these texts reflect not the earliest years of Irish Christianity but a later period that sought to preserve and promote local ecclesiastical traditions.

As Dorothy Ann Bray (1992: 12) notes, Irish hagiography conformed broadly to European norms, following the familiar "birth-miracles-death" structure. She identifies three chronological phases: the foundational lives of major saints (e.g. Patrick, Brigit, Columba); the Norse-invasion period, which emphasised local cults and community authority; and the post-Norman era, during which Irish traditions were increasingly aligned with Roman orthodoxy.

Because these works were composed well after the saints' lifetimes, they offer little reliable historical detail. Ian Bradley (1999: 6) speculates that early missionaries were too preoccupied with evangelism to record their efforts, leaving later writers to rely on oral tradition—making it nearly impossible to distinguish legend from fact. Daniel Melia (1974: 211) reinforces this point, highlighting that the Irish Church relied heavily on professional oral transmission, which further complicates historical interpretation.

Composed during a transitional time that was "no longer Roman, nor yet medieval" (Morris, 1957: 2), the *Vitae* reflect the social and ecclesiastical concerns of their authors more than an accurate depiction of the saints themselves. Still, systematic documentation accelerated in the late seventh century, spurred by factors such as the plague of 665 and the lessening austerity of monastic life (Bradley, 1999: 4). Another pivotal moment was the Synod of Whitby in 664, which resolved liturgical disputes between the Irish and the Anglo-Saxons/Romans in favour of Roman practice and prompted a backlash among Irish monastics, fuelling a desire to preserve their distinct spiritual heritage (Bradley, 1999: 5–6).

This cultural anxiety contributed to a nostalgic idealisation of the past, as reflected in both native hagiography and Bede's *Ecclesiastical History* (c. 731), which portrayed Celtic Christianity as spiritually rich and anarchic yet suppressed by Roman bureaucratic authority (Bradley 1999: 24–25). As a result, the genre evolved into what Bieler (1949: ii) calls "a kind of religious romanticism," and what Kirby (1974: 5) critiques as "essentially destructive of historical truth." Meek (2000: 163) underscores this, stating: "the truth is that we cannot know the truth."

Yet these narratives were not mere monastic propaganda. Despite their ambiguity, they reveal authentic devotion and widespread veneration of local saints (Bradley, 1999: 36). One of their most enduring features is the syncretic blending of Christian themes with native myth and legend, a hallmark of what would later be celebrated—and contested—under the banner of Celtic Christianity.

The fusion of orality and historicity in the *Vitae*

As Donald Meek (2000: 149) observes, Christianity did not arrive in Ireland as a new religion imposed on a spiritual vacuum. Rather, it encountered a society with its own legal, ritual, and cosmological systems, preserved through oral tradition and embodied

by figures such as the *filí*,[1] *seanchaidhthe*,[2] and druids. These cultural custodians carried the mythological cycles of the Fomorians, the Tuatha Dé Danann, and heroic figures like Fionn MacCumhaill and Cú Chulainn.

Bray (1992: 13, 20) suggests that early Irish hagiographers may have had bardic backgrounds or interacted with travelling poets who visited monasteries, thereby integrating narrative styles, exaggeration, and symbolic structures from native storytelling into Christian texts.[3] This synthesis gave rise to saints portrayed not only as holy figures but also as cultural heroes—defenders, judges, poets, and prophets (also Ó Briain, 1947). Bray identifies this integration particularly in the recurrence of the "Hero's Journey" motif,[4] introduced by seminal mythologist Joseph Campbell (1949); in Irish lore, however, heroism extended beyond the warrior to include poets, kings, druids, and lawmakers. Legendary and/or mythical figures like the great bard/poet Oisín, Cormac mac Airt, the legendary law giving king, Suibhne, the warrior-poet cursed by Saint Rónán to live as a mad hermit, and Amergin, the druid who used magic to help the invading Milesians conquer Ireland, exemplify this expanded archetype, which overlaps with portrayals of Irish saints as morally transformative, boundary-crossing figures (Bray, 1992: 14).

The synthesis of orality and historicity is particularly visible in two recurring narrative motifs within hagiography, the first of which is divine vengeance. Saints are frequently depicted wielding supernatural power in acts of retribution—cursing rivers, animals, or adversaries—as seen with Patrick, Columba, and Rónán. While vengeance is a common motif in Irish myth (e.g., the tragic tale of Deirdre and Naoise[5]), in local hagiography, it is infused with divine authority. Máire Johnson (2015; 2016) categorises these actions into five forms of spiritually sanctioned judgment, all of

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[1] Native Irish and Scottish learned poets and storytellers who were also thought of having divination powers. The *filí* continued to offer their services primarily to local chieftains and *lairds* (lords in Scots) up until later medieval times (for further reading, Nagy 1981).

[2] The *seanchaidhthe*, found both in Ireland and Scotland, were poets and storytellers, trained in special bardic schools, and paid by clan chiefs to be their storytellers, song makers, spokespersons, and historians. As John Shaw (2007: 4) notes, the seanchaidhthe were considered a lower order of poets, able to both recite and compose in vernacular Gaelic, while wandering bands consisting of this type of bards, known as cliar seanchaidhthe, were still offering their services well into the eighteenth century.

3 Irish monks played a significant role in preserving the mythological lore of their native heritage. Accounts of the heroic deeds of mythical figures—such as those mentioned in this article—survive in fragmented form in texts like the Lebor Gabála Érenn ("The Book of the Taking of Ireland" or "Book of Invasions"), an 11th-century Gaelic compilation of prose and poetry. This work, attributed to local clergy, recounts the mythic origins and migrations of the Tuatha Dé Danann to Ireland. The clerical recording of such myths has sparked ongoing academic debate. On one hand, it is viewed as a deliberate attempt by monastic writers to bridge the chasm between Christian world-chronology and the prehistory of Ireland, thereby providing the Irish with a mythic national history akin to those of Greece or Rome. On the other hand, some scholars regard these texts as preserving genuine historical traditions—transmitted orally into the early Middle Ages—that may hold archaeological and cultural credibility (Koch, 2006: 1130; Williams, 2016: 130).

4 Joseph Campbell's "Hero's Journey" motif, also known as the monomyth, outlines a universal narrative structure in which a hero embarks on an adventure, faces trials and transformation, and ultimately returns home changed or enlightened. This cycle typically includes stages such as the call to adventure, crossing the threshold, undergoing ordeals, receiving aid, and achieving a form of rebirth or reward. Campbell argued that this pattern appears across cultures and mythologies, reflecting a shared human experience of growth through challenge.

5 The story revolves around the life and death of the Deirdre, a girl of astounding beauty who refused to marry King Conchobar mac Nessa as she had fallen in love with the warrior-poet Naoise. The enamoured fled to Scotland. However, Conchobar never forgave them, and lured them back to Ulster by treachery and killed Naoise. Deirdre eventually took her own life. The oldest version of the story is preserved in The Book of Leinster (c. 1160).

which, according to him, echo pre-Christian legal norms: "prayer vengeance," "prayer and fasting with vigil," "outright malediction," "negative or maledictory prophecy," and "passive retaliatory judgement".

Closely tied to vengeance is the figure of the saint as *divine magician* and a spiritual mediator. Borrowing Van Hamel's (1934) term, Bray (1992: 15) describes these saints as protectors, healers, and miracle-workers—akin to druids yet channeling divine rather than cosmic power. Meek (2002: 166) argues that frequent confrontations between saints and druids in these narratives symbolically articulate the transition from pagan to Christian authority.

Bray (1992: 15–16) also compares the saint to the shamanic archetype—one who mediates between worlds through asceticism, solitude, and ecstatic vision. Though the existence of Celtic shamanism remains debated due to a lack of concrete evidence (Barmpalexis, 2022: 63), Irish hagiography often echoes such motifs, especially through the tradition of the *geilt*, a wild hermit figure transformed by spiritual crisis.[6] The geilt archetype bears resemblance to the "hairy hermit" motif in religious tradition (Frykenberg, 1992), while also likely predates hagiography, originally serving as a symbolic expression of moral crisis and atonement among warriors traumatised by battle (Bernheimer, 1952: 13).

The persistence of native elements in Christian contexts—such as wilderness isolation, magical fasting, and animal transformation—reveals the long-standing negotiation between indigenous traditions and imported Christian frameworks. This interplay continued well into the early modern period, most visibly in the enduring popularity of Ossianic ballads. These texts suggest that even as hagiography reinforced Christian virtue, it never entirely severed its roots from Ireland's mythic imagination.

Ossianic balladry

The fusion of Christian and pre-Christian traditions persisted well beyond the early medieval period, finding powerful expression in the Ossianic ballads—an enduring strand of Gaelic literature that shaped both Irish and Scottish cultural memory. Centred on the mythical cycle around Fionn MacCumhaill and his warrior band, the Fianna, these narrative poems take their name from Oisín, Fionn's son and the chief poet/bard of the group. The ballads circulated orally for centuries before being recorded in manuscripts such as *The Book of the Dean of Lismore* (1512–1526), compiled by Sir James MacGregor.

The most widely debated modern rendering of these traditions came in the 1760s, when Scottish poet James Macpherson published what he claimed were translations of ancient Gaelic poems attributed to "Ossian" (Oisín). Though later revealed to be partially fabricated, Macpherson's works captured European imaginations, inspiring figures from Goethe to Napoleon. Not only did his fieldwork

[6] A *geilt* (plural *geilta*) is a figure from early Irish tradition who, driven mad by trauma, guilt, or spiritual crisis, flees society to live in the wilderness. Often translated as "madman" or "wild one," the geilt embodies a liminal state—between sanity and madness, humanity and nature, paganism and Christianity. These figures, like *Suibhne Geilt* (the "Mad Sweeney") and the mermaid *Lí Ban*, are marked by motifs such as asceticism, animal-like behavior, and poetic or prophetic insight. The concept is etymologically and symbolically linked to *Geltacht*—a term later associated with regions preserving Irish language and tradition—suggesting a deeper cultural memory of wilderness as a site of both marginalisation and spiritual authenticity. Blending Celtic myth, Christian hagiography, and shamanic archetypes, the geilt serves as a powerful symbol of spiritual transformation through exile and solitude (Bergholm, 2012: 57–76).

help preserve valuable Gaelic manuscripts, but it also contributed to the emergence of the proper study of Celtic literature, drawing attention in particular to its ballad heritage (McKean, 2001). More importantly, these works helped catalyse the Romantic idealisation of the "Celtic spirit," portraying the Gaels as noble, nature-bound, and spiritually elevated—key themes that would echo throughout the Celtic Christian revival (Bold, 2005).

Thematically, the Ossianic ballads are marked by an elegiac tone and deep cultural nostalgia. A central narrative involves Oisín's journey to *Tír na nÓg*, the land of eternal youth, with the fairy woman Niamh. After centuries away, Oisín returns to Ireland to find the Fianna gone and Christianity ascendant. His dismounting from the fairy horse triggers his sudden ageing, rendering him a frail relic of a bygone age. In many versions, Saint Patrick discovers Oisín and engages him in a long theological dialogue.

These stories dramatised the cultural and spiritual transition from pagan to Christian Ireland. Saint Patrick often seeks Oisín's conversion, while Oisín defends the valour, loyalty, and moral codes of his people. Some versions depict his eventual baptism; others preserve his resistance. In one memorable exchange, when Patrick recounts the expulsion of Adam and Eve for eating a forbidden apple, Oisín retorts that he would have given them "seven cartloads" to satisfy their hunger—an emblematic moment of moral divergence between Christian doctrine and heroic generosity.

By the late medieval period, the ballads increasingly took on an anti-clerical tone, mourning the loss of heroic values and critiquing the perceived rigidity of Christian institutions. This attitude parallels the later tone of hagiographies, which, as noted by Dáibhí Ó Cróinín (1995), began to reflect similar nostalgia and tension. These texts did not merely preserve folklore; they became vehicles for contesting cultural identity under changing religious and political regimes.

In this way, the Ossianic tradition served as a bridge between mythic memory and lived religion, keeping alive the imaginative worlds of pre-Christian Ireland even as Christian motifs were woven into the narrative fabric. These stories became especially significant during later cultural revivals, when they were embraced as expressions of indigenous resistance and spiritual depth—qualities that would prove foundational for modern forms of Celtic Christianity (Nagy, 2001).

"Celticism" and the contemporary Celtic Christian movement

"Celticism" refers to a modern revivalist phenomenon that emerged in the eighteenth century across Britain, Ireland, France, and even non-Celtic countries such as Germany. Historian Joep Leerssen (1996: 3) defines it not as the study of actual Celts, but of the symbolic meaning attached to the idea of "Celtic" identity,

> To the extent that "Celtic" becomes an idea with a wide and variable application [...] [and] "Celticism" a complex and important issue in the European history of ideas: the history [of] what people wanted the term to mean.

Inspired by Edward Lhuyd's 1707 claim that the languages of Ireland, Scotland, Wales, Cornwall, and Brittany shared a common Celtic ancestry, revivalists promoted the notion of a unified Celtic identity grounded in shared linguistic and cultural heritage (James, 1999: 47–48). According to Marion Bowman, this romanticised idea of Celtic unity eventually "paved the way for the idea of a Celtic spirit" in contemporary spirituality (Bowman, 2014: 105), including among people outside Celtic regions who had no direct ethnic connection (Bowman, 1997).

This shift towards Celtic spirituality has deep historical roots. As Ian Bradley notes, "distance lends enchantment to the view—culturally and geographically as well as chronologically." The mystique of Celtic spirituality began circulating in Europe as early as the Middle Ages. For example, some of the earliest hagiographical texts about Irish saints were written on the Continent—such as the Vita of Saint Samson in France and a version of Saint Columba's life in Italy. Irish monks, driven into exile by Anglo-Saxon or Norman incursions, likely played a role in disseminating their homeland's spirituality abroad (Bradley, 1999: 2–3).

Within this context, two recurring motifs took shape: a sense of exile, and a nostalgia for the lost homeland.

The Venerable Bede, though Anglo-Saxon, played a significant role in cultivating a romantic image of Irish and Scottish saints for the English. More than Adomnán or the romantic imagery of "beehive huts," Bede helped make the Celtic saints endearing to wider audiences, portraying Ireland as a sacred land filled with saints (Wormald, 1992: 16). Bradley (1999: 27) further observes Bede's deep admiration for the Iona-based monastery of Lindisfarne, noting:

> Bede's treatment of the Lindisfarne monastery—originally established from Iona—and its traditions is noticeably warmer and more enthusiastic than his observations of his fellow Anglo-Saxon clergy and their monastic institutions.

Bede's Vita Sancti Cuthberti, for instance, notably portrays Saint Cuthbert's spiritual bond with animals, such as otters drying his feet after prayer—an image that would endure in Celtic Christian iconography (Eppig, 2023).

From the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries onwards, Celtic Christian identity began to gain increasing prominence. Contemporary Celtic spiritual movements often reflect both individual and collective efforts to reconstruct a "Celtic past" and adapt it for modern relevance. Central to these movements are themes of self-identity, ancestral heritage, and reverence for ancient sacred sites (Bowman, 1994: 147). By the nineteenth century, this revival reached its peak, culminating in what scholars have called the "Golden Age of Celtic Christianity."

According to John Koch (2006: 1623), modern portrayals of Celtic Christianity emphasise openness, ecological awareness, mysticism, and esotericism. It is often framed as a remnant of an earlier Christianity marginalised by Roman authority and Anglo-Saxon imperialism. This revival traces back to figures like Jules Ferrette (Mar Julius) and Richard Williams Morgan (Mar Pelagius), who in 1858 founded the Ancient British Church. They advocated a syncretic form of Christianity influenced by Irish folk belief and druidic elements, arguing it predated Augustine's appointment as Archbishop of Canterbury in 597 (Thomann, 2001).

Revivalist movements often idealise the *Céli Dé* (or "Culdees")—ascetic communities that emerged in eighth-century Ireland and later spread to Scotland and possibly Wales—as embodying a purer, nature-focused Christianity. Initially distinct in their emphasis on prayer, poverty, and reform, the Céli Dé—meaning "clients of God"—gradually integrated into broader clerical structures by the twelfth century, becoming institutionally indistinguishable from other church communities (Follett, 2006). Although Bergholm (2012: 130) argues such practices were not unique, the Culdees are frequently linked to early Irish "hermit poetry" attributed to ascetic monks. Ó Corráin (1989) identifies fourteen such poems; Jackson (1935) adds ten more. Interpretations vary: Patrick Hart (1967) sees them as reflections of monastic experience, while Ó Corráin—more convincingly, according to Bergholm—warns

against confusing memory with imagination. Bradley (1999) suggests many were written by Irish monks abroad, nostalgically evoking home.

The romanticisation of early Celtic Christianity was strongly shaped by French scholar Ernest Renan. Meek (2002) likens sarcastically his influence to a "Renaissance," citing Renan's claim that "no race had grasped Christianity with such originality as the Celts" (Renan in Gougaud, 1932: 46). As Bowman (1997: 243) notes, modern spiritualities often depict Celts as "noble savages," idealised and uncorrupted by institutional power. Chapman (1992: 14) echoes this, describing the Celt as a magical outsider—bard, warrior, and mystic—cast in opposition to industrialised modernity.

Meek critiques such portrayals as selective and instrumental. The saints, he argues, have been continually reimagined to serve various causes—spiritual, political, and even nationalist (1992; 1996; 2002). This revivalist tendency has drawn criticism from Gaelic-speaking clergy and scholars, who argue that English-led interpretations commodify or decontextualise indigenous Christian traditions. Seán Ó Duinn (2000) warns that sacred memory risks becoming a "spiritual consumer product," detached from historical and cultural roots.

This tension is visible today: many Gaelic-speaking communities remain ambivalent or disengaged from the Celtic Christian revival. As Iain Mac an tSaoir writes, authentic Celtic tradition is not inherited passively but must be lived and embodied through deep-rooted cultural engagement.[7] Yet, among the English especially, the turn towards Irish and Scottish Christian traditions is often driven by an identity crisis and post-imperial guilt. Bradley (1999: 206–208) argues that the romantic image of the "visionary Gael" serves as a spiritual counterpoint to the perceived dullness of Anglo-Saxon heritage, with much of Celticist literature written by English authors.

The symbolic heart of the revival is Iona, a Hebridean island closely tied to early Celtic monasticism and the legacy of Saint Columba.[8] In 1938, George MacLeod founded the interdenominational Iona Community, aiming to embody Saint Columba's vision by merging faith with lived experience. Called an "incurable romantic" (Bradley, 1999: 182), MacLeod promoted ecological awareness and helped shape the Celtic Church's association with environmentalism. His vision matured into a theological "green spirituality" where nature is sacramental, not fallen (White, 1967). By the 1960s, MacLeod had begun restoring Iona Abbey, transforming it into a spiritual retreat. By 2021, the Iona Community had over 2,000 members and Associates globally.

The community's publishing arm, *Wild Goose Publications*, promotes social justice, alternative worship, and postmodern spirituality (Forrester and Murray, 1996). Its theological shifts align with feminist and postmodern paradigms, focusing on embodiment and narrative over dogma (Saiving, 1960; Placher, 1997). These developments tend to particularly appeal to those disillusioned with institutional orthodoxy.

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7 Mac an tSaoir, The Metaphysic of the Cultural Tradition <https://www.clannada.org/metaphysics.html> [accessed 22 July 2025].

8 In the 560s, Saint Columba and a group of companions arrived from Ireland to the island of Iona, off Scotland's west coast, where they founded a monastery. Bringing with them their distinct form of Christianity, they played a key role in evangelising the Picts and Scots. Notable abbots included Saint Adomnán (679–704), Columba's biographer, and Conamail mac Fáilbe, a central figure in the Easter Controversy. The renowned Book of Kells, an illustrated manuscript of the Four Gospels, is also believed to have originated in Iona (Meyvaert, 1989).

Still, criticisms persist. Some argue the Iona Community promotes a syncretic blend of Christianity, New Age spirituality, and neo-paganism. Meek warns that its practices lean towards "easternising," favouring meditation and self-reflection more commonly found in non-Christian traditions. He further notes that followers of contemplative spiritualities are particularly drawn to the idea of a "remote Celtic island," citing Arran in western Scotland, which has attracted Buddhists from around the world as "a perfect retreat island—open to all faiths—because it offers an atmosphere of sacred calm, unspoilt beauty and peaceful isolation" (Meek, 1992: 23; also, Toulson, 1987).

Despite these critiques, Celtic Christianity continues to attract diverse followers. The movement's aims include recovering a perceived lost spirituality, especially among English Christians seeking deeper identity. Bradley (1999: 208) notes: "To find that the Christianity of Cuthbert and Aidan is as much part of the Church of England's heritage as that of Augustine and Lanfranc has been a liberating experience."[9] Whereas Anglican identity has often been shaped by Anglo-Saxon and Roman influences, the renewed appreciation of its Celtic roots has, for many, been liberating, offering a richer and more diverse spiritual lineage.

This English-led revival has been criticised by indigenous Gaelic-speaking Celts, particularly Scots, for its appropriative and patronising tendencies. Yet this English-led revival has shifted the symbolic centre from Iona to Lindisfarne, an island increasingly positioned as the new heart of Celtic Christianity (Raine and Skinner, 1994).

Two major revivalist groups—the Northumbria Community and the Community of Aidan and Hilda—are both based in England. The Northumbria Community, founded in 1992 near the site of Saint Cuthbert's death, emphasises missionary monasticism and values like "availability" and "vulnerability" (Bamford and Marsh, 1986: 9–10). The Community of Aidan and Hilda, founded in 1994, promotes holistic spirituality, research, and renewal through retreats and training (Bradley, 1999: 232–233).

The Community of Aidan and Hilda, founded in 1994 in Swanwick, was also established by members of the Charismatic Renewal movement. This scattered community focuses on reviving the legacy of Saints Aidan and Hilda and preserving the sanctity of early Celtic Christianity (Bradley, 1999: 232–233). According to its website, its mission is to "restore a holistic Christian spirituality […], research the first Celtic mission and related movements throughout history […], and resource the emerging and existing church" through prayer, worship, teaching, training, spiritual formation, retreats, courses, and conferences. These neo-Celtic groups aim to recover an idealised early spirituality, but scholars such as Corning (2006) argue this reflects modern desires more than historical reality. Such movements are often based on persistent myths: that early Irish Christianity resisted Rome, valued nature, upheld gender equality, and embraced local pagan traditions.

The Celtic Christian revival in England aligns closely with other similar Christian spiritual reimaginings, notably the Anglo-Catholic movement, which arose in 19th-century England through the Oxford Movement. Led by figures like John Henry

[9] Aidan, an Irish monk from Iona, and Cuthbert, a Northumbrian trained in Celtic monasticism, helped establish early Christian communities in northern England based on missionary work, asceticism, and simplicity. Over time, despite initial tensions between Celtic and Roman practices, their legacy became integrated into the broader Anglican tradition—providing a more spiritually organic and localised counterpoint to the institutional Roman legacy of Augustine (sent by Pope Gregory in 597) and Lanfranc (Archbishop of Canterbury post-Norman conquest).

Newman and Edward Bouverie Pusey, the movement aimed to recover sacramental and apostolic traditions in response to growing secularism and theological liberalism within Anglicanism. Later in their lives, Newman converted to Roman Catholicism, while Pusey remained Anglican, contributing significant scholarship and devotional renewal (Connolly, 2005). The Oxford Movement emphasised reconnecting Anglicanism with its pre-Reformation Catholic roots, stressing apostolic succession, liturgy, and ecclesial authority (Fraught, 2010). Similarly, Celtic revivalism turns to a mythologised oral early Christianity rather than patristic or medieval traditions. In both, spiritual renewal is sought not through strict historical accuracy but through imaginative retrieval. These movements are part of broader Christian Romanticism, expressing longing for a mystical, integrated past that addresses modern existential and ecclesial dislocation.

Bergholm (2019: 1989) observes that academics typically read hagiographies and poetry within historical-linguistic contexts, whereas modern readers seek personal resonance. She writes:

> The Columba of modern-day 'Celtic spirituality' may not be a figure that his hagiographer Adomnán would recognise, but the long history of this tradition demonstrates that audiences in very different historical and cultural contexts have always found in the saint some qualities that have enabled them to model him in their own image.

In light of this, this reflects two misunderstandings: first, that ambiguous sources are treated as fixed records; second, that such sources become central to community identity. This extends even into clergy, particularly within England's Charismatic movement. A notable example is the phrase "My Druid is Christ," attributed to Columba. Though its authenticity is debated, it is widely used to symbolise harmony between Christianity and native traditions (Bergholm, 2019). Such reinterpretations are less about continuity than resonance—they represent an evolving, imaginative engagement with history. Ultimately, the neo-Celtic Christian movement is sustained not by historical accuracy, but by its adaptability and spiritual relevance.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the contemporary Celtic Christian movement is best understood as a dynamic fusion of historical myth-making, spiritual aspiration, and cultural identity reconstruction. Rather than a straightforward revival of an ancient ecclesiastical tradition, it is a complex and often romanticised reimagining shaped by modern needs and ideals. Drawing from ambiguous vernacular and hagiographic sources—such as the lives of saints, bardic poetry, and folklore—neo-Celtic Christian communities reinterpret these texts not merely as historical references, but as flexible frameworks for spiritual renewal, personal meaning, and importantly, communal identity. This process extends beyond ordinary believers to include clergy, particularly within the Charismatic Renewal wing of the English Church, who have played a prominent role in re-shaping the narrative of Celtic Christianity.

Symbols like the phrase "My Druid is Christ," though historically contested, are emblematic of the movement's broader impulse to harmonise Christianity with indigenous pagan traditions and present a more holistic, nature-centered, and egalitarian spirituality. Movements such as the Iona Community, the Northumbria Community, and the Community of Aidan and Hilda illustrate how early monastic ideals are being reframed through ecumenical, New Age, and socially progressive lenses. While critics argue that such movements engage in syncretism and idealised projections, their

ongoing vitality speaks to a deep cultural and spiritual hunger for rootedness, mysticism, and ecological consciousness.

Ultimately, the appeal of Celtic Christianity lies not in its historical precision but in its imaginative power—its ability to offer a spiritually resonant, culturally meaningful, and emotionally compelling vision of faith in a fragmented modern world. To fully grasp this phenomenon, both scholars and practitioners must engage not only with its historical sources but also with its contemporary reinterpretations, recognising that meaning is continually made—and remade—at the intersection of past and present.

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