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CONTEMPORARY VOICES FOR CELTIC CHRISTIANITY

Clans, Warriors and Monks

Russian pilgrims Anton Odaysky and Sonia Mikhaylova interview Kate Tristram, an English historian and author on early Christianity in England, Scotland and Ireland, who lives on Lindisfarne Island.

ANTON: Kate, many people today talk about Celtic spirituality and the Celtic Christian tradition. What would you identify as its distinguishing features?

KATE: I myself distinguish two particular lines of study that we can follow to get a glimpse of the early centuries of Christianity. Of course, Irish monks brought the faith here to Lindisfarne, and we know quite a lot about the Irish monastic Christianity that existed between about 500 and 900 AD. The monks led the church and did widespread missionary work.

What I call the other line of Celtic Christian research is based on the people who lived in the Hebrides and Western Highlands of Scotland. In the nineteenth century a man named Alexander Carmichael, who knew those people well, made a collection of their prayers and hymns and traditional religious stories and he published that collection. This is also a form of Celtic Christianity, a remnant of the original, but different from the early

Opposite: St. Augustine preaching to King Aethelberht and Queen Bertha. Roman Mosaic.

Irish monastic Christianity because it is based on people's homes and ordinary daily occupations.

We can find examples of very heroic, austere, self-giving to God in ancient Irish Christian monasticism. But if we want examples of how lay people brought God into every detail of their lives, how they prayed with everything they did right through the day, from getting up and going out to work to laying down at night, then we can get that most easily by looking at this Hebridean material.

I don't think it is very easy to put the two together, because they are quite different. One is ancient monastic, and the other is fairly modern – nineteenth century – and very domestic. At the same time, I think we can be inspired by both because from the ancient Irish monastic Christianity we can look at our own lives and see if we only remember God in the morning and evening, or if we remember him right through the day. So these are different things, and although I think they are both useful and important, I don't think it is right to put them together and try to make them one – they have different roots, different origins, and yet all those people are Celts or descendants of Celts. For myself I think the most important lesson that we can take from Celtic Christianity is their wholeheartedness. We can learn about dedication from these Irish Christians.

ANTON: What about the influences Celtic Christianity had on Western Europe and vice versa? Also, is it possible to find traces of Celtic Christian influence in Northern Russia or Eastern Europe?

KATE: I think those would just be small traces, and it was most likely through the Vikings. You see, before they became Christian, the Vikings raided numerous places in England, like the monastery here at Lindisfarne, and took many young Christians to sell them as slaves. Now, the Swedish Vikings in particular had a lot of contact with Russia, right down into Constantinople – all the way down the rivers – and I think it probable that a good many of these slaves did keep their faith. It must have been very difficult for them, but those who kept their faith could have even taught the people who had captured them. That was one way that Celtic Christianity reached Scandinavia and then perhaps went with the Swedish Scandinavians to Russia.

Also, Irish and English monks went as missionaries to northern Germany. Of course, the people of northern Germany and of Scandinavia were really the same people; they hadn't divided into the Norwegians and the Danes

and so on. Quite a lot of the Christianization of northern Germany was also done by people who had been influenced by the Irish monks. For example, there was an Englishman, trained in Ireland, St. Willibrord. He went first to the Frisians and then to the German peoples of the north. In turn, he influenced the English St. Boniface, who spread the faith farther into Germany, and from there to Scandinavia. A little later was the ninth-century Frank, St. Ansgar, in Germany and Sweden, followed in the eleventh century by the English St. Sigfrid in Sweden.

Most of the Irish monasteries founded in Western Europe were founded in the south – France, Switzerland, northern Italy. Of course, it's difficult indeed to know how far Celtic influence spread out northwards from there. This was a very disturbed time in European history with a lot of movement of peoples. As long as peoples are moving, there is always a chance that they may influence each other, but I don't actually know of any historic accounts of Celts who went to Russia.

ANTON: What about the influence upon Celtic Christianity from Eastern Christianity? I'm thinking of the Desert Fathers, for example.

KATE: As we know, the Desert Fathers were the first Christian monks. Now, there was a trade route for merchant ships from the eastern Mediterranean, around what is now Spain and France. That trade route divided off of France, and one route came into Britain by the Bristol Channel while the other went to southern Ireland. It is very, very likely that there were Christian missionaries on some of those boats. We haven't got names for any of them, and because of this we don't actually know who first brought Christianity to Ireland. We do know, of course, about St. Patrick, but there were Christians in Ireland before St. Patrick and it is very probable that they came on some of these merchant ships.

There was a lot of trade across the sea between Ireland and Gaul [Northern France], so that was another avenue for exchanging Christian teachings and practices. However, I don't know of any Celtic people who went back the other way, as far as Egypt or Israel. They certainly voyaged to Rome and back, but our ignorance could be just a lack of historical proof. This is the problem, isn't it? Things could have happened, but we don't have records.

ANTON: And how can we explain the situation that early Irish monks celebrated Easter differently?

KATE: It wasn't just the early Celtic monks who did this. The problem really was the mathematical problem of trying to get a timetable of the sun and a timetable of the moon and putting them together, as it were, because everybody agreed that Easter Sunday should be the first Sunday after the first full moon after the spring equinox. You needed to know in advance when Easter was going to be because you had to start Lent. Several attempts were made to produce these mathematical tables and the Irish were using one set, the people in what we now call France and Germany were using a different set, and the people in Rome were using a different set again. It wasn't just the Irish vs. the Romans, there were other people also using different sets of tables. Somebody in Rome came up with a simpler table than the one that had been in use and that was the one that eventually was adopted in the Western Church.

But there were other problems for the Irish. The Continental people thought the spring equinox was March 21st, which it is, scientifically speaking. But the Irish people thought the equinox was actually March 25th. You can see that this would lead to a problem because just supposing that you've got the equinox on the 21st, a full moon on the 22nd, and the 23rd is a Sunday, then the Continentals said: That is Easter Sunday. But the Celts said: No, because we've not yet had the equinox. It has to be the first Sunday after the equinox. That was part of the problem certainly.

Also, the whole question of the Jewish Passover came into it as well. The Jewish Passover, of course, was on the full moon after the spring equinox. This could be any day in the week, whichever day happened to be the full moon. But sometimes, of course, that would happen on a Sunday. And Continental Christians said, "In that case, when the Jewish Passover happens on the Sunday after the spring equinox, we don't want to keep Easter that day, because we don't want to keep Easter the same time that the Jewish people are keeping their Passover." But the Irish said, "Why not? We are perfectly happy to keep Easter on that particular Sunday." So you see there were several points of difference apart from the actual question of the mathematical table which was being used. And with regard to that last point, the Irish disagreed with putting Easter Sunday a whole week later just because the Jewish Passover, or rather the full moon, fell on that Sunday, because they said, "By the time we celebrate Easter the moon will be in its last quarter, and when the moon is in its last quarter the hours of dark are longer than the hours of moonlight and so we upset all the symbolism of

Easter, because the symbolism of Easter is that light must prevail over darkness.” So they said, “We can’t possibly keep Easter once the moon is on the wane, you see – once the moonlight is fading.” So, they had several reasons for rejecting what the Continentals were doing.

The Continentals probably had got the best mathematical table and they were certainly right in thinking that the 21st of March was the equinox, not the 25th. But at the same time, they didn’t understand these other Irish objections. At least, no one seems to have answered them. The Continental answer appears to have been, “We are right. You fit in with us.” Whereas the Irish, of course, were also saying, “No, we are the ones who are right.”

So I think that all those things lay behind the date of Easter. Also, the Irish Christians did say that they took their traditions from St. John, whereas the Continental Christians were prepared to take their traditions from Sts. Matthew, Mark and Luke.

They were very, very keen on the Gospel of St. John in the Irish Church. And they felt that if they gave up their way of doing things and their traditions, they would be going against everything that their ancestors, their spiritual fathers, had taught them. Lately, I have been studying the letters of St. Columbanus, and a lot of these questions concerning Easter come up. In his early letters he writes to the Pope and says, “Now look...we Irish are right. All you have to do is agree with us.” But in his last letter he says, “Well, look – why can’t we both exist side by side?” So he’s given up any hope of actually persuading the Continental people that the Irish view is right, but he still doesn’t want to give up his particular position.

Now, he died in the year 615 AD and a whole century later the monastery at Iona was still refusing to give up their way of calculating Easter. It was a real problem for the Church. Of course, in those days there was so much missionary work going on that it wasn’t such a good example to the pagans if the Christians couldn’t agree on the date of their main feast. So that was another reason why it was important to settle it.

SONIA: I’m interested in the early Irish and British manuscripts. What can you tell us about the influence of Roman and Greek manuscripts upon the Celtic?

KATE: Roman manuscripts certainly influenced the Celtic. Not so much Greek ones. It used to be thought that a good many Irish Christians had learned Greek, but recently the evidence for that has diminished. But certainly Roman manuscripts, yes. The Celts had the books of the Bible in Latin

versions. They had what were called the Old Latin versions – before St. Jerome made the Vulgate translation in the fourth century. Afterwards, of course, they had the Vulgate as well. When they wanted to make a beautiful manuscript, both the Irish and the English people used their own patterns to illustrate the text and the kinds of patterns that you see in Irish and English manuscripts are the same sort that they used in precious metal work, jewelry and so on.

SONIA: From pagan times?

KATE: From pagan times indeed. You see, the pagan Irish and the pagan Anglo- Saxons were both very good in what we call precious metal work – jewels, silverwork and so on – and they created these lovely patterns that you can still see today. So, what happened when they became Christian and they began to use books and reading and writing? They transferred the patterns from the metal work onto the page.

SONIA: They weren't afraid to depict pagan patterns on Christian manuscripts?

KATE: No, the Christians thought that the fact that they were Christians and using the patterns to produce documents in honor of God made them perfectly all right. It was like taking a talent and dedicating it to God.

ANTON: Have you found any Egyptian influence on these patterns?

KATE: Yes. It's difficult, actually, because as I said, we don't know of any direct Egyptian contact with the Celts and, of course, it's always possible that people in different parts of the world could invent the same patterns. On the other hand, I know that people have said that some of these patterns are very similar to Egyptian patterns, and it is important to remember how objects moved. Let's imagine for a moment that someone on that trading ship from the eastern Mediterranean has an object or manuscript to barter. He trades it or hands it over as a present and gets something else back. Trading was often done like that. Perhaps the man who takes it is a skilled metal worker who thinks: I can use these patterns. And so he does. Then, other people come and look and they copy, and before you know where you are the pattern that started in Egypt has become very popular in Ireland. That sort of thing, you see, could easily happen.

ANTON: Yes, but weren't there also extensive trade routes between Egypt and the British Isles?

KATE: Yes, indeed, direct contact was certainly possible. We know that ships from the eastern Mediterranean cities of Phoenicia, Tyre and Sidon certainly came to what we now call Cornwall, to get tin from the Cornish tin mines. And if they could sail there, obviously so could other people. Of course, the Mediterranean is a comparatively easy sea to sail on because it hasn't got tides, although it often has storms – but it hasn't got the problems of a real tidal sea. Julius Caesar's soldiers were said to be terrified when they came to Britain and first saw waves. There were many more people using the seas for raiding, trading, and on military or other business for the Empire than we usually think.

ANTON: Could you tell us how Celtic Christians viewed nature and how this shaped their practice of Christianity? We've heard that they had a very natural understanding of the Holy Trinity.

KATE: I think that they lived very close to nature because they were entirely a farming people. You see, when Christianity came to Ireland there were no towns at all – absolutely no towns. No roads. Everyone lived on farms, and almost everyone raised cattle. So they lived very close to nature because it was absolutely their everyday life and they didn't know anything else. The Irish gods, in the days of pagan Ireland, were nature gods – gods of the sun and the moon and so on. But they had a feeling, even in pagan times, that there was a unity of life, that there was a sort of living will and heart and mind behind everything, and that the gods, the people, and the animals were all expressions of this one basic life. So, when Christianity came, I think the missionaries found it comparatively easy to persuade the Irish that there was just one Creator, because they were already moving in that direction. One of the remarkable things is that, as far as we know, Ireland was converted without bloodshed. There weren't any Irish martyrs. I don't mean that paganism disappeared just like that, but Christianity won a gradual and peaceful victory over paganism in Ireland. In part this was because the people were prepared. Their ideas already were such that they could receive the Christian message.

The part of the Christian teaching that they would have found difficult would be to forgive your enemies, because they were really rather keen on fighting. So, I think certain parts of the Christian message would have been

harder to accept, and they would have first had to understand Jesus Christ during His life on earth in the context of their own heroes. He fought against the forces of evil and overcame them. Even when He died on the Cross, this was a victory over the forces of evil. They would have taken to that easily.

ANTON: We know that Celtic peoples were organized as clans, and you say that the Celts were good warriors. How did this way of life, this spirit, incarnate into Celtic Christianity?

KATE: I think the early Irish Christians were clever. They knew that the people were war-like and used to fighting, so they told them to stop fighting each other and start fighting the devil instead. They presented the Christian life as a struggle against evil. They would have read in the New Testament about spiritual warfare and about the devil and his angels opposing the forces of God in the Book of Revelations, and so on.... Basically, the Irish said: We've got to fight, so we'll fight for God, we'll fight on His side, and the leader of our army is Jesus Christ, who was Himself a warrior. We also have all sorts of saints and angels helping us in our fight. Therefore, be strong, be brave, and fight with a good heart for God. You see, if people were used to the idea that it is manly, that it is good and right and proper to be brave, to be loyal, and to fight for what you think is right, then Christianity can be presented to them like that.

I think that missionaries should always find things in the culture of the local people that they can use to present their faith, and the Irish Christians used the warrior ethos of their own country. Of course, it was really only the aristocrats who were the warriors for the most part. They were the ones who were trained for fighting and nothing else. The farming class had to get on with their farming or else everyone would starve.

As to your first point, in any country where there is a clan structure, it makes good sense to try to get the clan leaders first. People expected clan leaders to lead in every aspect of life including religion, and if the elders of the clan said: "Yes, we have become Christians," the other members of the clan would be much more likely to listen favorably. So, in their very early days the Christian missionaries did – quite rightly in my view – attempt to first persuade the leaders and then it spread down through the society.

ANTON: And the clan system would also have helped to organize monasticism in Ireland?

KATE: Yes. I think it would have done so, because in a clan society people get very used to seeing themselves as a member of a group. In Ireland, really, the clan was so important. Members of the clan took their morals, their practical skills, their laws and protection from the clan. The clan taught them everything. And they saw themselves and formed their sense of who they were by their place in the clan. That Christianity required a form of cooperative living, people living together in groups, would have made a lot of sense to them. They were not individuals. At least, not what we call individualists, now.

ANTON: I am particularly interested in Venerable Bede, even though he belongs to a later Christian tradition in the British Isles. Can you tell us about him? What were the main influences on his writings?

KATE: The main thing to realize is that the monastery that Bede lived in was completely different from the Irish monasteries and had very strong contacts with the Continent, particularly with Rome. There wouldn't have been anything in Bede's early life to connect him with Ireland or the Northumbrian tradition of St. Aidan in the north. Since he stayed in the monastery, he depended for his information either on people coming to his monastery in Jarrow to visit, or through people writing to him. And he does seem to have had a very large correspondence, particularly with other monasteries, although I don't think that he ever had much understanding of the Irish tradition, or much sympathy with it. He had a terrific, amazing knowledge of the world of Christian scholarship on the Continent. Of course, he had access to what was probably the best library in England at the time, and that was really what made it possible for him to do his work. We know that Bede was interested in Eastern Christianity, but whether he knew of the works of the Eastern Christian Fathers like St. Basil, St. Gregory, and so on, I really don't know.

ANTON: I ask this because I've read that a Greek bishop named Theodore lived in Southern England and was one of Bede's teachers.

KATE: Yes, that's true. Theodore of Tarsus. He had been a Greek monk, but perhaps because of the movement of Islam towards Asia Minor, he, like many Christians were driven westwards. He was very intelligent, very highly educated, and ended up in Rome. When the Pope of Rome was looking for another Archbishop of Canterbury, he wanted to choose a man called Hadrian. But

Hadrian said “No, I know a better man,” and he introduced this Theodore of Tarsus to the Pope. The Pope was a little wary because he was Western, you see, and here was a Greek monk, and he didn’t know what he might teach. The Pope said to Hadrian, “Well, all right, we’ll make him Archbishop of Canterbury, if you will go to Canterbury as well to keep an eye on him. I think that the Pope thought that Theodore of Tarsus, who was already about 66 or 67, would die fairly soon and Hadrian, who was younger, would succeed him as archbishop. But in fact, Theodore of Tarsus lived until he was nearly 90 and worked right until the end! He was undoubtedly a great man.

At Canterbury, Archbishop Theodore and Hadrian established a school of Christian study where one could learn Greek as well as Latin. This was the first time that the English had a chance to learn Greek. Whether Theodore of Tarsus introduced any of the writings of the Greek Fathers, the Eastern Church Fathers, I’m not sure, but he was an excellent Archbishop of Canterbury!

ANTON: Thank you.

Most Beautiful of All are the Words from the Trinity

Anton Odaysky and Sonia Mikhaylova continue their search for the roots of early British and Irish Christianity in an interview with Ray Simpson, the author of *Exploring Celtic Spirituality*, and the leader of the St. Aidan and St. Hilda Community in Northumbria.

ANTON: Ray, can you tell us about the main features of the Celtic spiritual tradition in relation to God, nature and man?

RAY: We have rather limited documents but most of what we know about Celtic Christianity is from reading the lives of the Celtic saints, a few of which were written very soon after their deaths, and others a hundred or two hundred years later. Also, we know quite a lot by piecing together the poems, the prayers, and the penitentials that survive, and by seeing the effect of all these things on the population. Also, if we take seriously the tradition of prayers learned by heart in the places where Celtic peoples remained in Ireland, Wales, and Scotland we can build up a sense of some of the great themes and priorities in the spirituality of the Church in Celtic lands in the fifth through the tenth centuries.

I think that fundamentally there was a deep single-minded passion for God. Celtic pagans were single-minded in battle, they gave everything, and when they accepted Christianity they brought that quality with them. For example, some of the holy people would spend whole nights immersed in lakes or streams praying to God. There were many who wandered for years and even for the whole of their life – pelegriantia – wondrous in their love of God. Others, such as St. Columbanus of Ireland, who founded a great monastery, believed that we have to love God so much that we must engage in extreme ascetic practices. The Celtic Christians were also inspired by the stories they learned through the writings of St. John Cassian, St. Athanasius, St. Jerome, and of the Desert Fathers.

Also, in my opinion there was a deep, profound, and natural understanding of the Trinity. Some scholars say that it was universal throughout the

Church, but we must remember that when Arianism swept the Church and much of the West, it was St. Athanasius who said that the British Church had stayed firm while much of the rest of the Empire went over to heresy. We have later traditions of St. Patrick using a shamrock to teach people the meaning of the Trinity. And there's a beautiful poem in a sixth-century writing called "The Loves of Taliesin," which came from the part of Britain we now call Wales. It says, "Beautiful are many things in nature, but most beautiful of all are the words from the Trinity."

The *Carmina Gadelica*, collected by a 19th-century civil servant named Alexander Carmichael, is a compilation of prayers and hymns which had been passed down for many centuries among the Scottish descendants of the Celts in the Hebrides and highlands of Scotland. In it, there are many references to the Trinity as "The Three of Limitless Love," or "The Sacred Three," or prayers such as, "I lie down this night with God; I lie down this night with Christ; I lie down this night with the Spirit." So I believe it is fair to say that a vivid and intimate sense of the Trinity was one of the features of Celtic spirituality.

Of course, they deeply believed in the Scriptures and they memorized them. Of all the Scriptures, they loved St. John's Gospel most of all. They learned that by heart first, and then the other three Gospels. But they also were taught by missionaries like St. Columbanus that there were two books. They held the book of Holy Scripture in one hand, and the book of creation in the other. They loved the sense of the presence of God in creation. Some scholars think modern writers have romanticized this, but the number of legends of Celtic saints making friends with animals must mean something.

There is also quite a lot of nature poetry – more from Wales and Ireland than from Scotland, which reveals a love of nature. There is a very early Creed attributed to St. Patrick (probably actually a little later than him) which gives a tremendous sense of God coming through creation. When early Christian missionaries converted the sun worshipers, they called them to worship Christ as the True Son (Sun), or the Sun of Suns, and there is a catechism, which some have attributed to St. Ninian, and which is certainly quite early, that asks how we can study God with our reason when we see Him permeating all creation – every insect, every piece of earth. Although Celtic theology was not as formulated as Orthodox theology because the Celts were not great analyzers, they clearly had an understanding of the presence of God in creation.

ANTON: How did Celtic Christians understand man's purpose on earth and his place in the universe in general?

RAY: Well, there aren't long sermons and homilies from the Celtic Fathers as there are from the Orthodox Fathers in the East. What we do know is that they did not go along with St. Augustine and his approach to original sin....The purpose of life was to grow in moral stature and wisdom. I don't think they used the term "deification," which the Orthodox do, but they had very much the same understanding. This understanding was not only held by Pelagius, who is debatable because he was a heretic, but by Eriugena who saw the Logos as permeating all of creation. There were different levels of awareness in creation and the human being was the supreme specimen of creation to glorify God. There was also St. Irenaeus, one of the leaders of the Celtic Church in Gaul, who said that the glory of God is seen through a human life lived to the full.

So, there was that aspect, but we must be fair. There was also St. Columbanus and others who taught that we are wretched sinners as well. So you've got both strains, as you do in Orthodoxy. Two different ways of looking at the human person.

There are many other aspects of Celtic Christian spirituality, as well. Self-mastery, repentance, the ascetic practices were all very important – the idea that we can be athletes for God. Fasting, of course, and they kept three Lents each year. Outside of fast periods it was normal to fast both from food and from marital relations for two days before the Sunday Eucharist. That is very clearly established.

I think another aspect of Celtic spirituality is a very vivid understanding of the world of angels and saints. They specifically taught that we are to get to know the saints, and they kept the anniversaries of local saints. In the life of St. Samson of Dol, for example, we learn that God did as many miracles when the people celebrated the anniversary of their saint as He did originally through the saint. And that fit in, of course, with the pre-Christian view because the Celts had a strong sense of another world where there were heroic battles and they were always victorious. When they became Christian they peopled this other world with saints and angels, and the Holy Trinity above all. Hierarchies of spiritual beings.

Because the early Celtic Christians were pioneers, and as, of course, Ireland was the first country outside the Roman Empire to be Christianized –

it rather naturally took on a pattern of Christianity that wasn't the same as within the Empire – the Irish were much freer to follow the impulses of the Holy Spirit in ways that were natural to them. For example, we have the great stories of St. Brendan. Although they were written long after the events, and people debate how much is legend and how much is fact...still, getting into a coracle and believing that wherever the wind blew them was where the Spirit of God wanted them to be, is very characteristic of them as a people. Which brings up another key feature of Celtic spirituality: being on the edge, being vulnerable, allowing yourself to be blown by the Spirit.

A very important characteristic of Celtic Christians was that they did not believe that you extended the kingdom of God by being more powerful than the non-Christian people you are trying to convert, by building imposing buildings or by using political persuasion. For that reason, the Celtic form of the Church was suppressed. The Roman form, which did make alliances, built large buildings, and secured territorial organizations, was in a position to dictate how the Celtic mission should be organized. Because most of the leaders of the Celtic mission were faithful and humble servants of Christ, they accepted this to be part of serving Christ – to abide by the new rules.

But in the early days, when they themselves shaped the local Church, they were very much amongst the people, poor, humble, giving their money away. In Ireland, after the Anglo-Saxons colonized much of Britain, the Celtic mission was formed around the monasteries, and this was absolutely radical. Saint Patrick had brought in the arrangement of territorial bishops with parishes and dioceses as on the Continent and throughout the world at that time, but because the Irish Christians were so open to the Holy Spirit and allowed the natural patterns of the people to go their own way, each clan created a hub which had a monastery at its heart. The leader of the monastery was one of the leaders of the people of that clan. The bishops became members of the monastery and took vows of poverty, obedience and chastity and didn't have to organize things. They just did their sacramental duties, so there wasn't a problem of power going to their heads. Many people think that the parish system is breaking down in the West because of globalization and so on, and that another form of church organization, more on the Irish pattern, may be more suitable for our time.

ANTON: What about mutual influences that took place during the first thousand years – European influences on the Celtic Church and vice-versa?

RAY: In the first four centuries after Christ, the Romans colonized Britain, although not Ireland. Of course, not all of Britain, but south of Hadrian's Wall. But we are told by Tacitus that Christianity reached Britain before Tiberius Caesar, which was in 37 AD – although this may be inaccurate. So, Christianity came through Romans who may have been soldiers or colonial officials, but also through people who may have come in boats to trade along the shores – who had nothing to do with the business of the Empire. In any event, Christianity took root very early in Britain. But when the Roman troops left Britain in 410, the leadership of the church mostly went with them.

In the following centuries there were many pagan invasions from the Picts and later the Anglo-Saxons from Germany. Then, people like St. Ninian and St. Patrick, who were left from the remnant of the Christians, came to the fore. Patrick turned to God when he was a slave in Ireland. After he escaped, he was trained in Gaul, some think by Bishop Germanus at Auxerre. It is also quite possible that he was trained at the monastery in Lérins (Lerinum) which was called the Holy Isle of Europe and had a different rule from most. In Lérins there was a pursuit of learning, but also of holiness, and monks were free to leave the walls of the monastery and live on their own after a year. In fact, a British Christian called Faustinus became bishop of Lérins. So there was a definite link between the Holy Isle and Britain. And then again, St. Martin of Tours, who became a Christian hermit and formed the great community at Tours, emphasized a quite different form of monasticism than what had been the norm, where the clergy had status. When he became a bishop, Saint Martin's idea was: "I will not sit on a throne, I will sit on a milking stool," and he asked all the clergy who were trained in his community to do the same – as a way to live humbly amongst ordinary people.

St. Martin called his community a colony of heaven, because instead of being a Roman Imperial colony, it was a colony of love. We know that St. Ninian went there, and others from Britain as well, and that they were profoundly inspired. St. Ninian came back to what we now call Whithorn, on the border of southern Scotland, and formed the first well-known Christian community in Britain, called Candida Casa – a place of tremendous love and influence. From there, many Pictish people of northern Scotland were evangelized. We also know that among the British – in the part of Britain we now call Wales – there were huge numbers of conversions. When the Anglo-Saxons invaded in the sixth century and the plague spread through Britain, millions of people – some say three million, which was very many in those

days – emigrated to Morico, which is now Brittany and Gaul in northern France. The seven episcopal dioceses of Brittany were founded by British bishops. So, this is another link between them.

One of the Irish annals mentions seven Coptic monks from Egypt coming in the fifth century. Also, it was an aim for devout Christians from noble families to make a pilgrimage to Rome or to Jerusalem, and we know that some did get to Jerusalem. The books of St. John Cassian, who spent a year in the Egyptian deserts with the Desert Fathers and then came to Gaul, were circulated in the monasteries of Britain and Ireland and had a great influence. We also know that Athanasius' life of Anthony was read widely here, and that St. Basil's writings were also of great importance. As I said earlier, there was a tremendous affinity with St. John's Gospel – St. John the Apostle. For one hundred years or so after about 410, contact with Rome was cut off, but the trade routes with Alexandria and other great ports were still open. So, there is evidence from pottery and other things that quite a lot of trade was coming from the East at a time when Britain and Ireland were cut off from Rome. People speculate that there was quite a strong influence from the Eastern church, and also because some of the art work is similar to that of Byzantium. Was it copied or is it just coincidence?

ANTON: Was the Celtic spiritual tradition rather close to modern Orthodox tradition, or not?

RAY: This is a big question and it's very difficult to give a simple answer. It is clear that the Celtic Church in Britain was replaced by a Roman Catholic, and later a Protestant form of church, but it is quite difficult to be sure of the details of Celtic practice, for instance, exactly how saints' days were celebrated. It is also clear that the Eastern Orthodox Church hasn't undergone any dramatic change in the form of papal imposition or a protestant reformation. Therefore, there are great similarities between Orthodoxy now and the British Church of the fourth to the tenth centuries. I'm not sure there were icons in the Celtic Church in the way that we know them, but it is clear that there was a free use of the imagination and a love of the creative arts and beautiful illumination.

English Anglicans today would claim – whereas a Roman Catholic would disagree – that the Anglican Church continued the Church that was there in the Celtic times, and in the Reformation it continued the original univer-

sal orthodox Church by telling the Pope to stop. Anglicans would say the Anglican Church told the Pope in the fifteenth century what the Orthodox Church told the Pope in the eleventh century. Others would disagree. But there is no doubt that it was far more traumatic for the English Church, which reacted to what it saw as Roman Catholic abuses by throwing out many things that the Orthodox kept and which many Anglicans later regretted had been thrown out and wanted to bring back – such as saints’ days. So it’s a messy thing in Britain, although there is a large movement within Anglicanism to rekindle that original birthright.

One other point of difference between the Celtic Church and Eastern Orthodoxy was that the Celtic Church was indigenous, and its form in Ireland was very different from its form in Anglo-Saxon Britain. It hadn’t been part of the old Roman Empire, and didn’t use a standard liturgy. We have evidence that the different monasteries each had their own liturgy – drawn from the universal Church – some from Rome, some from Byzantium, some from Gaul, and some they wrote themselves. But there was a variety.

SONIA: Do you think the Celtic tradition was lost?

RAY: I’d say it went underground, rather than lost. It’s like a stream that went underground and is now coming up above ground again. But some people would say it was lost.

SONIA: It wasn’t preserved by the people?

RAY: Well, yes and no. Take St. Cuthbert here in Lindisfarne. He was a Celtic Christian who accepted the rules of the Synod of Whitby in 664, which imposed Roman regulations, and he carried on praying under the new forms and continued his deep life of prayer and spirituality. After his death, veneration for St. Cuthbert was widespread for hundreds of years. People came from all over Europe to his shrine, and when it moved to Durham they went there as well. There were religious communities dedicated to guarding his shrine, and although their organizational forms changed, I think something of the spirituality continued. In the homes of the Highlands and islands of Scotland where there were never many priests or Reformed Church ministers, these ancient prayers and way of thinking that Alexander Carmichael collected in the last century have been passed down from parents to children from before Cuthbert’s time. So, it hasn’t completely died out.

ANTON: Many people romanticize Celtic Christianity. Can you advise us what to avoid as we explore it.

RAY: Well, individualism. I get endless letters from people, and they reflect that we are in a “pick & mix” society, a post-modern society. People, shops, doctors, television, anything – you pick the bits you like and you make a little menu just to suit yourself. A lot of people like the Celtic tradition – so they pick the things they like. Nobody picks vigils and penance – they just pick creativity and things like that. They pick “celebrating being human,” and the poetic prayers, and God in everyday life. But the idea of being a martyr and laying down your life – that’s too much.

ANTON: We see that now in Britain there are many new churches and parishes that recognize themselves as independent congregations. Should we understand this protest to be like the appearance of the lay monastic movement in the fourth century? Are these new congregations a response to post-Christian society in our contemporary world?

RAY: Again, I would say yes and no. Many of the leaders of these new churches and communities are really men of God, and they have good, loving, and non-judgmental spirits. But some have been very proud and think all other Christians are worthless. They don’t survive. They fail after twenty or thirty years. But the ones that have been the most successful have one failing that the desert monastics did not have. They are very, very busy. They are task centered and these new churches are not based in the soil of silence and being with God. They are busy evangelizing, and pastoring, and prayer-bombing. So that is a question – whether the new churches can continue to be effective without learning some other principles of monasticism. Many things are happening: people from new churches are saying, “We believe God is calling us to go back to monasticism, to be a spiritual father and to disciple others in the soil of solitude,” but they don’t yet have the framework in which to do this. If they can be introduced to the monastic tradition, then perhaps they can experience what is missing. ✱