Celtic spirituality
Exploring the fascination across time and place
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The study of Celtic spirituality and changing priorities over time

Although the current interest in Celtic spirituality is ‘perhaps most evident in the form of attractively packaged commodities which can be purchased at the postmodern spiritual supermarket’ (Bradley 2010: vii), despite this more commercial manifestation, interest is also demonstrated in the popularity of pilgrimages to Celtic holy sites and workshops. Modern-day pilgrims to these Celtic sites include ‘New Agers, feminists and deep ecologists, as well as liberal, evangelical, and charismatic Christians, [who] identify with its ethos and message and call for a recovery of its key principles’ (Bradley 2010: viii). In his 2009 book Pilgrimage: a spiritual and cultural journey, Bradley points out that over 250,000 people visit the tiny isle of Iona each year, with as many as 1,600 each day in the summer months. This is significant on a small island that has only just over 100 year-round residents, and as it takes such a long time to travel there.

If, as Bradley says, people are drawn to the ethos and key principles of Celtic spirituality, what are the ethos and key principles, and why are people today drawn to them? What might the answers to those questions imply for social work academics and practitioners?

Celtic spirituality is a term that is often used with little acknowledgment of how imprecise a description it actually is. Since the texts that inspire an understanding of Celtic spirituality are early Celtic Christian texts, I will use both terms: Celtic spirituality and Celtic Christianity. Some scholars (Davies and O’Loughlin 1999; O’Loughlin 2000; Sheldrake 2013) suggest, however, that both these terms are a little misleading since they point out there was never any unified Celtic identity, or unified Celtic Church separate and distinct from the Roman Church during the historical period that gives rise to most of what is now referred to as Celtic spirituality. Although some say the origins of the term ‘Celts’ was in Greek and Roman geographical and ethnographical writing ‘from the sixth to fourth century B.C.[E] … the term had no precise ethnic signification and [the] Celts merely designated those people who lived in the west’ (Davies and O’Loughlin 1999: 4). Alternatively, Chadwick suggests the Celts were a recognisable people in Central Europe by 500 BCE and it was only with Roman conquest in Europe that the Celts were pushed west to those areas we think of as Celtic today: Ireland, Scotland, Wales and parts of England (Chadwick 1970).

The history of the Celts is important because, as Sheldrake points out:
Spiritual traditions do not exist on some ideal plane above and beyond history. The origins and development of spiritual traditions reflect the circumstances of time and place as well as the psychological state of the people involved. They consequently embody values that are socially conditioned. … This does not imply that spiritual traditions and texts have no value beyond their original contexts. However, it does mean that to appreciate their riches we must take context seriously.

(Sheldrake 2013:12.)

In the early medieval period (the period in which we find the first descriptions of what is called Celtic spirituality), religious and spiritual practices were far more likely to be fundamentally local, without any over-arching religious unity, as would have been supported and valued after the ‘neo-imperialism of Charlemagne in the ninth century’ (Sheldrake 2013: 68). This is one argument why, despite the recent interest in Celtic spirituality as a separate and distinct form of spirituality, it is not possible to support an argument that there was one form of Celtic spirituality totally distinct from other local forms of spirituality practiced in Britain at the time. None the less, the spread of Celtic spirituality and Celtic Christianity has been described as having sprung from Ireland, moved to Iona with Columba setting up a monastery there, and then spread through Scotland and northern England. Of particular note, monks travelled from Iona to Lindisfarne in Northumbria where another Celtic monastery was set up by Aidan. These early churches and monasteries were not separate from the political, cultural and royal concerns of the time; when the Northumbrian King Oswald, who had been influenced by Celtic spirituality in Iona, married a Queen who had been raised in the south of England and influenced by the Roman Church, the royal couple began to experience challenges in their differing faith practices particularly in relation to the date for celebrating Easter, and so a gathering was organised at Whitby in 664. Bradley (2010) reports that many suggest this meeting marks the ousting of Celtic spirituality in Britain, but he states,

It may be true that the Synod of Whitby did mark the end of a distinctive native Celtic Christianity in Britain. But that end took a long time coming – if, indeed, it has ever come … [It] continued as a fairly distinct and recognizable entity in several parts of the British Isles for another 500 years after Whitby.

(Bradley 2010: 25)

Celtic spirituality/Christianity continued to be practiced in Iona, and was ultimately only pushed back into Ireland from there due to Viking raids. So, despite arguments that a separate Celtic spirituality or Celtic Church did not exist, there is also some evidence that the Roman Church recognised there were Celtic practices occurring and they attempted to bring them more in line with their own.

Focus on the natural geographical and social context of the development of Celtic spirituality requires consideration of early medieval Ireland (Bradley 2010; Sheldrake 2013). Since Ireland was never part of the Roman Empire and so no Roman city or road system was developed at that time, the Irish landscape remained largely wilderness, and since it was a relatively small island, the sea remained a dominant feature, particularly as a means of transport, rather than traveling through an inhospitable interior; ‘it does not take a vast leap of imagination to make connections between these realities and a particular spiritual “temperament”’ (Sheldrake 2013: 68). What was characteristic of the early Irish Church, or ‘Celtic spirituality’, were the following: asceticism; solitude; a profound sense of a Trinitarian God, saints and angels all around in the day-to-day lives of people; natural imagery in prayers and poetry; a wandering form of
pilgrimage seeking a ‘place of resurrection’; a focus on the spiritual needs of individuals; spiritual guidance and the importance of ‘soul friends’ (anam cara); private confession and penance (Sheldrake 2013).

Any world religion attempting to make an impact in a new indigenous culture will inevitably experience ‘some degree of fusion or coalescence … between the new religion and the religious forms it is seeking to replace’ (Davies and O’Loughlin 1999: 12). In relation to Celtic spirituality, or Celtic Christianity, pre-Christian and pagan paradigms were influential. They were often centred on particular sacred places in the natural world, especially those where water was a key feature. Birds, animals and nature generally are important in Celtic spirituality and are represented often in the art and poetry associated with it (Davies and O’Loughlin 1999).

Pelagius is a significant representative of early Celtic Christianity. Having been born somewhere in Britain or Ireland (Bradley 2010) around 350, he studied in Rome and travelled through North Africa and Palestine, being influenced by the Desert fathers and other Eastern traditions. He was excommunicated by the Roman Catholic Church as a heretic due to his disagreement with St. Augustine of Hippo’s statements on original sin and the need for grace, which had become the teaching of the Roman Church while Pelagius remained committed to the earlier Christian (and Celtic) position ‘that babies were born innocent and that baptism was a sign and seal of God’s gracious love for them rather than an operation which had to be performed to avoid their dispatch to Hell’ (Bradley 2010: 63). Pelagius also stressed the essential goodness of nature, with a divine spark existing within all of creation (Bradley 2010; Newell 2008). ‘The Celts felt the presence of Christ almost physically woven around their lives … and a conviction that the presence of God was to be found throughout creation’ (Bradley 2010: 33) as depicted by the intertwining ribbons of the Celtic knot. This leads to the suggestion that the Celts have a great deal to teach us today about our relationship to the rest of the Earth, and it is this aspect that makes Celtic spirituality of interest to those committed to deep ecology and a renewed sense of stewardship of the world’s resources.

The Celts’ awareness of the divine presence in all things has been described as being similar to an experience with Buddhist mindfulness, moving beyond the physical to an embrace of the spiritual world. In particular, the Celts ‘felt the narrowness of the line that divides this world from then next’ (Bradley 2010: 37). More recently, George MacLeod, who accomplished the rebuilding of the abbey on Iona in the middle of the twentieth century, also stressed the manner in which the physical world is ‘shot through with the spiritual’ (Bradley 2010: 107). MacLeod has been described as ‘unselfconsciously’ speaking of angels and feeling the nearness of heavenly hosts: ‘Pilgrim and poet, he tirelessly preached the oneness of creation and the thinness of the line that divides this world and the next’ (Bradley 2010: 108). As ‘angels’ are a further popular area of fascination, it is possible that for many people their interest in Celtic spirituality, and pilgrimages to Celtic sacred places, are motivated by an interest in the possibility of a direct experience with something mystical and unmediated by organised religion and religious leaders.

Exploring people’s engagement with Celtic spirituality and place

On my first visit to Iona in June of 2010, when I began a series of research interviews with people regarding their engagement with this setting, which has been described as a thin place, I met a couple of regular visitors from Ireland. They suggested that it would be impossible to understand Celtic spirituality without visiting Ireland, so in October of 2010 I made my way there. I visited with both of them and conducted research interviews with two interesting contacts they provided: the first was a self-labeled Celtic monk, who chose to leave the Roman Catholic priesthood in order to commit to the practice of Celtic spirituality; the second was
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a Roman Catholic priest, who described himself as having been able to integrate Celtic spirituality into his Roman Catholic faith. These two opposing methods of engaging with Celtic spirituality provide examples from the two extremes of the continuum we may experience as we meet people in professional practice: those who combine alternate spiritual practices within organised religion, and those who take up alternate practices instead of being affiliated with organised religion. Social work practitioners need to recognize and support whatever practices are providing people with a sense of meaning and purpose in their lives, and not assume that one way is more legitimate than another.

On Inis Mor, the largest of the Aran Islands off the west coast of Ireland, which attracts as many as 400,000 tourists/pilgrims each year, I interviewed Dara Molloy (Molloy 2009), whose biography can be found on his website (Molloy 2012). He was ordained a Roman Catholic priest in 1979, and while working with youth in his community he was provided with contacts on Inis Mor and arranged for a short camping trip there with a youth group. At that time, he had already been unsure if it was right for him to continue on in the priesthood and he said he would describe himself as having been on a search, although he would not have been able to say what he had been searching for. He had been offered opportunities to travel overseas to become a missionary, but was sure he should stay in Ireland. While visiting Inis Mor that first time, he knew at once that this was where he should return to live: It was his ‘place of resurrection’, as the Celtic monks of the early medieval ages would have described a place that called to them and suggested that they should stop there to live out the rest of their days. Dara explained that for the first time in his life he felt immersed in his Gaelic heritage, which he said he had lost. He felt drawn to reconnect not only to the language, but to the spirituality, beliefs and values of those early Celtic monks who had lived on Inis Mor.

Dara knew that I was interested in learning about people’s engagement with thin places so he said he would start by talking with me about that topic, although he also said this wasn’t his ‘favourite word’. He went on to suggest he preferred the terms ‘threshold places and threshold times’. He suggested that there are times in life and during the day that are like thresholds and he thought these were consistent with threshold places, leading to moments of insight in people’s journeys and in their stories. He also added that he believes that the fact someone is searching for something does not mean what they find is inauthentic.

Dara went on to say that for him Inis Mor is a threshold place, feeling as though it is on the edge of the world. He remarked that certainly in medieval times, people in Europe truly believed it was on the edge of the world, since they knew of nothing further west. Inis Mor, as an island off the west coast of Ireland, and Iona, off the west coast of Scotland, would have both been considered on the edge of the known world and, therefore, on the threshold of other possible worlds. Due to the length of time it continues to take to access these places today it still feels as though you are on the edge of the world when there, despite our current understanding of geography.

Dara explained that he was drawn to the simplicity and imagery of Celtic spirituality and felt it needed to resist any attempt made from outside to impose a structure. He did not want merely to take up a superficial use of certain Celtic prayers and hymns and integrate them into organised religion, but rather wanted to live differently. Since giving up his role in the Church and relocating to Inis Mor, he has married and now has two children, making an income providing various ceremonies as a priest, monk, druid or lay person, dressing however the people requesting the ceremony would like him to. However, he says he chooses to call himself a Celtic monk in order to ‘liberate the term from its institutional framework’. For him a Celtic monk chooses to follow a spiritual path at every level of life. For him, Pelagius’ notion was not new and heretical at the time he was excommunicated but rather represented original Irish
commitments, resisting the imposition of the Roman Catholic Church’s teaching. Dara also said he speaks about aspects of God being in the sea, or aspects of the Goddess being in the river, because he likes this imagery but he is speaking metaphorically. He said that ‘the Divine is so vastly beyond us’ and the notion of us having been made in God’s image ‘is a bit arrogant’ but he believes that there is a spark of the divine in everything and so everything can begin to move us towards the Divine.

At the other end of the continuum, I then met Fr. Frank, who had been the priest at Ballintubber Abbey in County Mayo for 25 years at that time. Ballintubber Abbey, which was built in 1216 and celebrates its eight-hundredth anniversary in 2016, marks the beginning of Tóchar Phádraig (St. Patrick’s Causeway), a 35 km pilgrimage to Croagh Patrick (a 764 metre mount), which Frank explained has been, according to archaeological excavation, a site of worship since 3000 BCE. Frank also took me to Church Island, near Ballintubber Abbey, which is a small island on which people lived more than 3,000 years ago, and on which also stood an ancient monastery in the past, according to carbon dating. Currently it has a tiny chapel and a few other buildings used for retreats. The chapel is the fifth built on that site, having been completed in the fourteenth century, but containing a small window area above the altar from the sixth century. Frank led me on a pilgrimage around the island, recounting the history of people through Biblical stories from creation through the gospels by reflecting on images present in the natural environment. Time and again Frank came back to the need to learn from Celtic traditions and their respect for nature in such a way as to stay connected to the love of Christ (or the Divine), but he suggested that this would also need to be ‘demonstrated through our treatment of people, especially those who have been marginalised from the love of God somehow’. He focused on the interconnectedness of all of the created universe (similar to Buddhist principles again) and the need to look after creation rather than using and abusing it. Frank believed the majority of people had become much more concerned with a search for power and prestige, rather than on fostering community and a love of the environment.

During my interview of Frank and his reactions to my questions about ‘thin places’, he related his thoughts to the story of the fall of Adam and Eve in Eden. He said he thinks of us as still living in Eden but being unaware of it. Frank believes the other world, both good and evil, is all around us. He conceded that some places may be ‘thinner’ and so it might be easier to connect to the other world in those places, such as Ballintubber Abbey where there is always someone present praying and the act of ongoing prayer keeps the space special. He also spoke about pilgrimage and the need to engage in pilgrimage with an openness to the whole process rather than a focus on just the end goal. Frank does not think many people have experiences like Paul’s on the Road to Damascus (no big ‘aha’ moments in a ‘thin place’), but rather most people have a more gradual experience over a longer journey. When preparing young people for the Tóchar Phádraig, Frank tells them that one of the ‘rules’ for the walk is that there must be no complaining. He said that he tells them just to say ‘Thanks be to God’ at any moment when they might otherwise want to complain. This has much in common with Buddhist approaches to acceptance and non-attachment, which I believe offer people a much more peaceful engagement with life in contrast with mainstream approaches of struggling to try to fix and control circumstances. Of course, there has been a parallel growing interest in Mindfulness and Eastern religions in the West at the same time as the interest in Celtic spirituality has been growing. Again, the focus on simplicity and an alternative to the fast-paced world where we each must be independent and in control may be part of what is appealing. I also suspect that as more people in the West become interested in Aboriginal spiritualities and they struggle with not appropriating Indigenous knowledges, they may turn to their own roots, many of which are in Celtic Indigenous traditions.
Conclusions: informing social work practice now

Despite declining rates of affiliation with organised religions in the West, and a continuing mainstream preoccupation with the accumulation of money and prestige, along with the power to purchase and consume, many people are searching for alternatives to this fast-paced, individually-focused lifestyle. There is a growing interest in down-sizing and simplicity (Elgin 1981; Henning 2002), and as people grapple with the insecurity of employment, they may also begin to consider committing to nurturing place and community before following multinational companies’ precarious jobs, which are all consistent with Celtic spirituality-inspired lifestyle choices.

People’s interest in Celtic spirituality also appears to be partly due to their search for something meaningful (spiritual) in their lives at a time when they may have become dissatisfied with organised religion. For some, they will be able to meet those needs separate from any formal church, while for others, they will be able to integrate these aspects into attendance at church, recognising that these forms of practice were historically present in the Early Christian Church. Keating, for instance, describes centring or contemplative prayer as a form of mindfulness that developed from a commitment to practicing interior silence leading to compassion and service to others (Keating 1992: 14-5). He describes how in the sixth century Pope Gregory (also known as Gregory the Great, who came from a monastic tradition) would have encouraged a form of personal reflection and contemplative prayer that would have allowed the common person to experience the Divine without the interference of the Church. By the sixteenth century, contemplative prayer was being described by the Church as extraordinary and only possible for the few. He suggests the ‘rush to the East is a symptom of what is lacking in the West. There is a deep spiritual hunger that is not being satisfied in the West’ (Keating 1992: 31). Celtic spirituality offers something similar to that offered by the Eastern religious practices and so is meeting some of those same needs people are experiencing that motivate them to search for different practices: a wish to connect with the Divine without needing priests to mediate on their behalf. Celtic spirituality, however, offers those people with roots in Britain or Europe an opportunity to reconnect to their own cultural heritage and to re-integrate these practices into local Western Church practices should they wish.

Another significant aspect of Celtic spirituality is the idea of there being a spark of the Divine in all of nature and in all people (similar to the underlying principle of saying ‘Namaste’ in yoga practice: the divine in me bows before the divine in you). This reminds social workers to look for the good in people despite outer layers of behaviours, and to be more concerned for the natural world in which we all live. Zapf (2007, 2010) has much to say about the need for social workers to take much more seriously the concept of person in environment, where the environment is not considered merely a backdrop but also as something of importance. Berry (1988, 2009) provides reflections on the sacredness of the universe and eco-spirituality, which also share something in common with Celtic spirituality.

In conclusion, I wish to highlight the manner in which my study of Celtic spirituality has recently assisted me in ethically engaging with a remote fly-in First Nations community in the far north of Canada. I have had the opportunity over the last two summers to travel with a colleague (a Roman Catholic priest and Religious Studies faculty member) and a small number of Religious Studies and Social Work students to a northern First Nations community, which is primarily Catholic. A number of First Nations communities and reserves come together for the first week of July each year on a small island for a Roman Catholic retreat, but also as a way of reconnecting to the land and some of their traditional cultural practices. July 2015 saw them celebrating their twenty-fifth anniversary on the island.

As a social work academic trained to take into account the effects of colonisation and the
oppression of marginalised communities, I was initially concerned about the fact these communities appeared so disconnected from their traditional Aboriginal spiritual practices. As a white woman visiting the communities with primarily white colleagues and students, I was worried about inadvertently continuing to support what could have been considered proselytising and colonising practices. Speaking with Elders in the community, I asked how I might be able to engage ethically and if there was anything they could imagine I could do that might be of use. They asked me to start sharing stories of what their lives are like. It is their belief that most people in the rest of Canada, let alone the rest of the world, have no idea of what life is really like for them there.

I asked about traditional Aboriginal spiritual and healing practices and was told that, because as Dene communities they had lost most of those practices, they would need to invite outsider Aboriginal people, like the Cree, to come and teach them their practices, but they do not want that. They have taken up Catholic spiritual practices and they say they are happy with those. Many of the Elders have taken up lay person roles in the Church and provide Catholic services to the community when the priest who rotates between communities is not available.

As my relationships continue to develop with other Dene community members, I am beginning to see more of how some of their traditional Aboriginal stories and cultural practices are continuing and are being interwoven into their Catholic spiritual practices. Reflecting on the manner in which Christian practices were influenced as they integrated with pre-Christian Celtic traditions and seeing how a respect for nature and imagery can be honoured within Christian practices has assisted me in realising that these Canadian Christian Aboriginal communities may have also influenced their practice of Catholicism (Blondin 1997; Goulet 1998; Riddington and Riddington 2013). This insight further supports my respect for the choices my Aboriginal community friends have made and continue to make when they choose to be so involved in the Catholic Church. It has also influenced the next step of my research process as we engage Elders in the community in sharing the stories of this ongoing process of celebrating cultural traditions at the same time as they participate in Catholic practices.

As Sheldrake (2013) points out, spiritual practices are not static and will continue to adjust to the cultural and psychological needs of various communities. Social workers need to become more informed about the spiritual and religious practices of the people and communities with whom they work, realising that practices change over time and can be unique in various local contexts. This is not about imposing one truth or one way of being on all people. This is about social work practitioners showing respect to aspects of people’s lives that give them a sense of meaning, purpose and hope, even if those practices and beliefs are different from the social workers’ own.

Note

1 I have previously presented clinical social work case examples of how I have integrated my interest in Celtic spirituality and spirituality more generally. Please see Béres (2012, 2013, 2014).

References