

Lecture #10 THE COMING OF CHRISTIANITY

Up till this time the population of much of northwest Europe--Gaul, Britain, and parts of Spain--was still comprised the Celts. The Rhine border divided them from the Germanic tribes outside, and when these tribes managed to cross over to the west, they were absorbed w/o difficulty into the Empire as federated groups.

By the fifth century a great unsettlement, tracing its source across the Russian plains to China, pressed these fringe tribes on. Vistoths harried the eastern empire and swept into Italy. Vandals desolated France and Spain. Franks moved into northeast France. Rome itself fell to the Visigoth Alaric in 410 AD. 100

By superb diplomacy the Roman court played off tribe against tribe, helped always by the respect for Rome felt by all invaders. When the Huns arrived, and later the Vandels it was devastating and Rome never recovered totally. The power shifted to Byzantium.

The fifth century warped the religious pattern of Europe out of recognition. Those who still had little commerce with Rome or Constantinople remained pagan. Most the rest had adoped a heresy known as Arianism. Christ was not God by nature, only by virtue of God's award after his impeccable life. He was sort of a dimigod, a term 20 they could understand. Mary had no miraculous sanctity either.

These ideas meant more to them than Catholic teaching and it spread, and moved forward with their movements across the west of Europe. For some time, there was peaceful coexistence between Arians and Orthodox. Christianity had always been refreshed by the originality of Eastern thought and now, because of many circumstances, the west was left to its own devices.

Outside the monasteries, Christianity had turned political and had lost its meaning. now the monasteries themselves were in danger because the source of their ideas, the east, was being interrupted. The monastic movement lost its ²⁰⁰energies, sinking into the torpor of materialism, which was the fashion of the times. Abbots were hirelings of ruffian chiefs or had grown rich. Monks with integrity went away to die as hermits.

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In only one remote corner of the western world did Christians have the time and freedom to develop and mature the creed. IRELAND. In part it was Gallic refugees, in part Britain which brought Christianity.

IRELAND BECOMES CHRISTIAN

Britain had become Christian two hundred years before, accepting the decision of Constantine (312 AD) as she did in most other orders, benefits and demands of her Roman overlords.

There are tales of Christianity arriving before this time, some claiming apostolic foundation, even Joseph of Arimathia founding the first church at Glastonberry.

Whatever Christians were in the country before Constantine's edict of Milan they were not favored by authority.

With the Imperial adoption of Christianity Britain played a part in the development of European religion. British bishops attended councils, even in Asia minor, and they sent missions to try to convert the Picts. They successfully converted some Celtic tribes in Wales.

Pelagius, ~~discussed last week~~, showed two things clearly: that in the remoter reaches of the empire new ideas could be strongly planted; and that even in those times there was a wide streak of pragmatism in the intellectual life of the islands.

As Roman influence ebbed, the Anglo-Saxon peoples began to flood into Britain and during the next two hundred years pushed their way across the country. Out of these battles comes a military leader who won a victory at the Battle of Mt. Badon, possibly in Dorset. This is Arthur and all we know about him is he checked the tide for awhile.

To the west went the people of the older society, the upper classes and most the middle group: the traders, the bureaucrats, Latin and the Roman way of government, craftsmen, writers and artists.

Christianity was swept along and Odin, Thor, Woden and Frig took its place. The Britons had been pushed to the edge of Europe. Some went to Brittany to bolster that unconquered refuge of Celts.

In Wales Christianity settled more firmly than elsewhere. A powerful monastic tradition began, born among the communities of France and

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owing its existence to the original Sinai foundations. From Wales it spread west, in the direction of the refugees.

So Christianity penetrated to Ireland, coming across the sea from Gaul and across the channel from Wales. However unlikely it seems, Ireland became the saviour of civilization for the west.

Ireland had a barbarous reputation but because of the upheaval in Europe and elsewhere, refugees gave Ireland thoughts and people that were to help her thru her task.

These influences worked on a strange and old civilization, and produced a strange and vigorous reaction.

*utube: Shew: From the desert
Captre and celtre*

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NIAL OF THE NINE HOSTAGES

Niell, the high king of Meath during the last quarter of the 4th century, was half British as his mother had been taken on a raid on Wales.

Britain was increasingly attacked as the Romans withdrew and Niall took advantage of the situation leading several raids on the coast of Wales. It was in taking Ulster that he took hostages to ensure no rebellion and from this he got his name.

It is from the O'Neill family that the Lords of Ulster descended until the time of Queen Elizabeth I.

Two incidents during Niall's reign were destined to have a profound effect on the future of Christianity.

On one of his pirate raids Niall brought back a boy named Patrick as a slave. Since he came from a wealthy romanized family, he found his captors boorish. However, he came to feel he had a mission among them.

Secondly, the raids on Scotland that had been going on for hundreds of years stepped up in intensity. Irish began to colonize the western islands and the mainland of Scotland, the area known later as Argyll, or east Gael. They brought their name with them for they were known then and for several hundred years, as SCOTI, or SCOTS.

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Christianity arrived and soon thrived in this atmosphere of skirmish, chivalry, primeval valour and squalid brutality. How could Christianity so easily replace the esoteric dominion of the Druids, whose authority prevailed every aspect of life and society?

two phenomena seem to be the answer.

One was the refined variety of the new religion that reached Ireland--this was the monastic form from Wales and Gaul as taught by St. Martain De Tours, and others.

the second was the character of the Irish themselves and it was in the substance of this character that Christianity was to act as a fermenting yeast. Some of the traits enable us to see why this was possible.

For five hundred years the Irish had been left alone by the outside world, except for a trickle of contact thru trade and buccaneering.

In this isolation they had developed a high opinion of their own race which was, for all practical purposes, the only race in existence.

They had done some "racial introspection" which can be seen in the legends, tales of supernatural heroism, of moral and religious dilemmas of their ancestors. They developed a colossal national pride, in spite of their country being, on the European scene, of no significance at all.

the Irish also had a love of classification. Every tale they told had to fit under one of the many headings available--cattle-raids, wooings, feasts, deaths or massacres--and they did always fit and observed conventions.

They had a tidiness in their rigid adherence to protocol, great love of formulating things, and especially significant numbers, such as three which we discussed a few weeks ago.

These qualities, their practicality and their dreams, were deeply embedded in the Irish character. To some extent they enabled Christianity to take root in the country.

If the success of Christianity was helped by the nature of the Irish, it benefited no less from the form in which it reached Ireland. The monastic variety of the religion was quite different from the hierarchical, diocesan structure of the established Roman Church on the continent and in Britain.

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Monasticism in Ireland kept more of the simple, explicit prescriptions, and more of its attractive, half-mythical content than the judicial hand of Rome encouraged.

Moreover, monasteries did not intrude on the lives of those who wanted no change. They were self-sufficient communities of men and/or women under the rule of an abbot or abbess.

They preached virtues that were very much like the respected standards of Irish society, and like the monasteries of Egypt they offered a welcome change to those who were tired of squabbles.

Most important, they were organised much like the units of society they came into. Mostly they were divided by sex, but many were "double monasteries" where both men and women dwelt.

Christian monasticism was a refreshing alternative, open to all, it kept no secrets from anyone (as the druids had) and had as its aim the happiness of the whole population.

LEARNING was the third quality which endeared the religion to the Irish. Memorizing and reciting legends had been the function of the druids, tho it was imitated by others, those not in the royal courts.

Now, there was a new source of tales, the lore of the Old and New testaments. There were comments to make, meanings to be dug, and subtleties to be explored by curious minds of recruited monks.

The Irish turned their ability at classification to Christian Theology with refreshed vigor. they learned and recited the psalms with ease, took in and extended the tables and classes of saints and thru their awareness of the numinous powers of nature relished the symbols and mysteries of the new creed. They adopted the trinity with a ready instinct.

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Christianity came at the best possible time, with refugees who brought other arts and distinctions which were welcomed in the country. As Germanic invaders overran Britain the British Celts sailed west bringing the tested benefits of their roman heritage.

This is when Ireland became literate for the first time. They learned Latin along with new ideas in science and cosmology so that in the dark years that followed in Europe the Irish never forgot, for instance, that the world was round.

the country became a ferment of new ideas and beliefs as the indirect impact of Rome was felt for the first time. Women could play as great a part as men in the new religion, and did

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The final reason for the success of Christianity was the absence of a reason for failure. Nowhere else in Europe had the Celts been able to impose their culture on all levels of society. Everywhere else the stamp of Rome was on all the rest of Europe and Britain. Only the Irish had something like a thousand years for a powerful class of Celts to imbue the whole land with their ideas, art and political forms.

The Irish alone had never learned to suspect foreign creeds, since they had experienced none. If the new religion appealed, it was given a fair hearing. And it appealed.

PATRICK AND IRELAND

How crucial Patrick was to the conversion of Ireland is a debatable point, and the debate has raged over the past 35 years or so. There is no chance of solving it, but there may have been two Patricks and. It has been assumed he died in 461 AD but a theory is that Patrick died at the end of the 5th century.

His mission in that case would have come later and his position as a pioneer would be strongly challenged as many Christians had already been at work in the south much earlier. It is even possible that Patrick's mission was to plant Roman Christianity in Ireland as over against the monastic version which arrived first.

He speaks of spending large sums of money and giving valuable presents to the kings, suggesting that their faith was venal. We know he found other communities of Christians in his wanderings.

Pelegianism thrived for a while in Ireland as it had in Britain, along with other heretical doctrines.

Patrick was ordained bishop in Britain, another clue that the Roman church was attempting control as abbots were all Ireland had before this.

Patrick's main concern was the primary step of getting people to acknowledge his God. It is the proselytising disease. That the Christian ethic did not get far during his campaign is shown by the undeterred warring habits of the generations that followed.

Patrick spent thirty years in Ireland, by the end of which Christianity was the dominant religion. He has been romanticized in legend and is probably a composite figure, with many legends worked over from the old testament stories.

That he helped to secure Christianity is not to be doubted but perhaps no more credit is due him than to a hundred nameless missionaries. To

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speaking of the rift between the Celtic and Roman church this early is to anticipate a later split, however the seeds were already there and the animosity between groups.

The Roman church--Patrick's church--was based on cities and towns upon which local life centered. If the Romans didn't find towns, they built them. The Church evolved an urban hierarchy based on the Roman empire's pattern.

In Ireland towns were unknown, the whole country was split into hundreds of tiny units based on family ties. The basic theology worked its way into the character of the nation, but the centralized authority did not take root for hundreds of years. Ireland remained a country of scattered clusters and took monasticism to itself like an heirloom.

As Britain became engaged in the Anglo-saxon invasions, Ireland was again isolated, but as a Christian nation. For a long period of incubation Ireland developed Christianity in her own way, suited to her own character.

Patrick's diocesan organization was not a natural fit for a nation of tribal cliques. So, diocesan organization faltered and fell. When Ireland again emerged, many years into the sixth century, monasteries were spread wide in each of the five kingdoms.

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CHRISTIAN PROGRESS IN IRELAND

For about 100 years there was little change in the life of Ireland. Christianity advanced and priests held mass, speaking mystical formula to a god who was invisible yet manifest in all nature. They also told the tales of the Jewish people.

There was more gusto in the new religion and young people felt a call to it, even giving up the comforts of ordinary life for a rigorous existence in a monastery.

There was change, but the past became even more important with the new faith. Druids were being ousted or converting but they were a run down class and their influence had long since waned.

There is nothing to show that Christianity changed the habits of the Irish except in the culture of the educated classes and in ritual, which was an outward form of a theology most of them, most of any nation, could never understand.

Christianity itself changed, as it did most places it went, adapting to the customs of Ireland. After a long period of time, it began to affect those who claimed it, but even then only superficially. It took hundreds of years for slavery to be abolished and women exempted from service as soldiers.

Christianity opened up whole new realms of knowledge for those who wanted it, the intellectual class always present in Ireland. Ireland herself had a scrupulous love of schemes, priority and place, the love of facts, the closeness of nature and the values and virtues of the pagan Celt.

For fifty years there was no records of the new spirit but for 200 years after that the cultural story of Ireland had taken hold and communities of saints sprang up over the country and provided the base from which this expansion could take place. Several individuals became the stuff of myths. Thus, most of the saints lives are an amalgam of pagan and Christian, fact and fiction, ancient and comparatively new.

As long as the recipe was for the greater glory of God, and the higher sanctity--and so heavier profit--of the writers abbey, it was fit for publication. All the same, creative monks could interpolate only what was compatible with the known facts and the spirit of the age. People beleived in

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miracles, so they created frills to the lives of saints that today we know are mythological.

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MONASTERIES

The monastic idea had changed in shape in its journey from Egypt. In the beginning it had been a retreat from the evil of the world to the natural world of God. It was personal.

In Gaul it had fitted into a social pattern. Monks went out to preach, convert and help the poor and sick. They began to bring people in, not just for conversion, but to learn about the religion and read the Bible, and hear the great truths explained.

In Ireland, the purpose was again expanded. Learning of any kind, Christian or Pagan, was encouraged. By drawing no clear line between, say, Augustine and Virgil, or David and Cuchulain, they managed to allay suspicion and animosity in the minds of the ordinary people. Many of the monks were not bound by oaths but by genuine respect for and love of the new learning.

Monasteries became virtual factories of scholarship. This took monks of all ages whose task was to copy for many hours a day, a very tedious job. This did not even include the other jobs, such as tilling the garden.

Because the diocesan organization of Patrick's day had quickly dissolved in face of the social conventions of the country, crowds would come under the spiritual guidance of the abbots of local monasteries.

Because of the central importance of the monasteries, importance was attached to appearances. Monks were punished for backsliding more severely than laymen for the same offense.

Two very Irish elements emerge from their forms of penance. One is the private nature of confession, which had in Gaul and Britain laid heavy stress on public confessions and atonement.

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CHASTITY:

the other is the confused idea of chastity. Roman Christianity had only extended a practice kept by Roman vestal virgins, priestesses of Diana, and sects and religious officials in every society, which sublimated physical love in dedicaiton to a deity.

The bishops were not unanimous about celibacy. St. Peter was married and nothing says he ever was otherwise. In the fifth century clerics under the rank of bishop in the western church could be married. In the eastern church, there has never been a problem with clergy marriage but one cannot be a bishop and be married.

BRIGID'S foundation at Kildare, founded at the end of the 5th century and which included men and women living in strict, tho probably not permanent, segregation. We know that it wasn't totally segregated, for visitation rights were allowed and if a child arrived, it would be raised for the Glory of God.

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IRISH CHRISTIAN ART AND WRITING

Irish Christianity and art came from many of the same sources. Styles were a rich amalgam of old Irish motifs and themes and design of Middle eastern models.

A clear open script, the Celtic half-unical, was developing which makes early Irish manuscripts more easy to read than any contemporary documents from other countries.

At this period the decoration of manuscripts was only beginning under the influence of scrolls imported through Spain and Gaul from middle eastern sources.

Later on the main aim ceased to be legibility, visual effect took precedence for as time went on, copying became more of a business for increasing monastic funds.

However, early on, the monks simply began doodling, they drew animals, moulded initials out of serpents or birds, and so forth, till facility of reading was more and more forgotten as words were split, bent, stretched or squeezed to fit the demands of pattern.

It was the Irish who invented the pocket books, smaller than a paperback, to fit in a satchel and be carried on their frequent journeys.

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IRISH VERNACULAR LITERATURE

Part of Ireland's luck in escaping the Romans was in being able to keep her own tongue and develop it in a literary way. They kept their spontaneity, tho they took willingly to Latin for scriptural and scholastic purposes.

Along with the doodling, the monks would make whimsical comments around the margins and some of these developed into poetry.

Freed by the new Christian culture and the prohibition against writing that had permeated their culture as well as the heavy duty of court eulogies and false genealogies, the Irish poet created not only one of the oldest European literatures outside Latin and Greek, but one of the most sensitive and appealing. Unfortunately, because of Ireland's isolation, most has remained undiscovered till recent years.

It will never be known how much of the tales of old heroes, written from this time on in the monasteries, derive their style, as well as their themes, from the cultural re-birth of the sixth century.

Much would certainly be accurate transcription of the old legends, but the habit of picking a little detail and blowing it up to great and colorful proportions, seems to owe its influence more to the single-minded attentions of the early hermits and scribes.

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BRENDAN THE NAVIGATOR:

Coming out of this early literature, full of exaggerations, comes some of the most beautiful fantasies of early literature. Among these are the seafaring legend of St. Brendan. Brendan, like Brigid, is a composite character with pagan threads woven into the Christian pattern. It is another example of the vigor of Irish Christianity, which had no reason to hate or suppress the ideas and desires of generations before the gospel came.

The hermit tradition had a long influence on Ireland, and probably its origins go back before Christian times. It is part of the syndrome that includes a passion for travel, a restlessness, a will to self-denial and a happy dependence on only the simplest things. Brendan's legend is an allegory of the pains and pleasures of the ascetic search for God.

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Brendan was born in 484 AD. He is said to have visions which pressed on him the need to travel on the ocean. His adventures are very much like many of his predecessors going to the "otherworld".

How much of Brendan's voyage is historical, how much spontaneous or derivative myth is impossible to know, our sources are so meagre and so late.

All we can say is that Brendan is a sailor and a saint fired by his vision, he recruits a crew from his monks (30 of them). They equip a boat, a curragh of wicker covered in stretched hide, and they sail from Brandon creek.

Other hermits, in ones or twos, were accustomed to sail off in a boat without oars, trusting to God. Few stories survive of their journeys. Not so of Brendan they take oars and sails and come back with a story.

Rather than tell you the story We will watch it now. The only problem is the boat they are shown in is not near large enough or even the right type but, suspend your judgement and hear the story. Its neat.

SHOW: BRENDAN THE NAVIGATOR (26 minutes)

@ 3500
wds