

CELTIC CHRISTIAN eSTUDIES COURSES

*Head through the Heart Learning*

**COURSE TITLE: INTRODUCTION TO CELTIC CHRISTIAN SPIRITUALITY**

**Aim**

To introduce students to key components of spirituality that characterise the Celtic Christian tradition in its first and subsequent waves.

**Who is this course for?**

Anyone who feels drawn to explore Celtic Christian Spirituality, for example:

People who seek to know God in a more holistic way; and who intuit that ‘Celtic spirituality’ may develop this;

Christians who are otherwise well-grounded in Bible or Church teaching who want to fill a gap in their knowledge or experience.

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**Required reading during the course**

You **MUST** obtain copies of the required reading texts in order to study this course.

Davies, Oliver (editor) *Celtic Spirituality (Classics of Western Spirituality*, Paulist Press 2000)

Simpson, Ray. *Exploring Celtic Spirituality: new edition with study guide*. (Kevin Mayhew 1995)

Simpson, Ray *Celtic Spirituality: Rhythm, Roots and Relationships*. (Grove Books 2003)

**Recommended reading**

Bradley, Ian. *The Celtic Way*. (DLT new edition 2003)

Davies, Oliver (editor). *Celtic Spirituality (Classics of Western Spirituality)*. Paulist Press 2000)

Mitton, Michael. *Restoring the Woven Cord: Strands of Celtic Christianity*. (republished by BRF 2010)

Simpson, Ray *.Celtic Daily Light: a spiritual journey through the year* (Kevin Mayhew 2003)

## ASSIGNMENTS

**A) Choose TWO of the following essay titles. They should be between 1500 and 2000 words in length.**

- 1) “Celtic spirituality is so vague it can mean anything anybody wants it to mean.” Discuss your response to this statement. You should seek to identify the reasons why it is possible for this the criticism to be raised and give examples that illustrate the problem. You should also attempt answer the criticism and suggest ways in which problems might be avoided.
- 2) Discuss the features of Celtic Christian spirituality that you think have distinctive or important contributions to make to contemporary society and Christian practice. Give reasons for your choices and support your ideas with examples that link history to the present.
- 3) There is often a contemporary divide between Christians who focus on evangelism and those who focus on justice. In the lives of early Celtic leaders there seems no such divide. What can we learn from them? Illustrate your answer with specific examples.
- 4) What relevance do you think the history and perspectives of Celtic Christian spirituality relating to women have for contemporary Christianity? Discuss, using examples drawn from the lives of Celtic Christian women.

**B) As a part of our commitment to ‘head through the heart learning’ we would like you to write your final assignment once you have completed studying ALL the course units. It should be between 1000 and 2000 words in length.**

The purpose of this assignment is to encourage you reflect on what you have learned, what impacts it has had upon you, and what you might need to do next. You might want to look back over the notes you have made in your learning journal and use these as the basis for what you write. We would like you to try and address the following:

- What aspects of Celtic Christian spirituality have resonated most strongly with you as you have studied this course, and why?
- What aspects have you found most difficult or problematic to embrace, and why?
- If you can identify any ways in which your views have changed due to studying this course, briefly write about this.
- Describe any ways in which you feel you need to change (or have already changed) your spiritual practices or the way you live your life in light of the things you have studied during the course.
- Briefly describe any subjects, issues or ideas related to Celtic Christian spirituality that you feel you want to explore further or learn more about.
- Briefly describe doubts or questions related to Celtic Christian spirituality that arise from having studied the course that you feel you feel are unresolved.

## **COURSE OUTLINE**

- UNIT 1      WHAT IS CELTIC CHRISTIAN SPIRITUALITY?**
- UNIT 2      BORDERLANDS**
- UNIT 3      PRESENCE**
- UNIT 4      PRAYER, PENANCE AND PRAISE**
- UNIT 5      LOVE OF THE POOR, JUSTICE AND HOSPITALITY**
- UNIT 6      HUMANITY, NATURE AND CREATIVITY**
- UNIT 7      POETRY AND ART**
- UNIT 8      MANHOOD, DESERT ATHLETES AND LIVING MARTYRS**
- UNIT 9      WOMANHOOD, WISDOM AND NURTURE**
- UNIT 10     AWARENESS OF HEAVEN**
- UNIT 11     COMMUNITY AND CHURCH, MISSION AND KINGDOM**

## UNIT 1

## WHAT IS CELTIC CHRISTIAN SPIRITUALITY?

### To read

Pages 3-54 of *Exploring Celtic Spirituality*

### After completing this unit you should be able to grasp

- A) The meaning of some terms frequently used in this course.
- B) A bird's eye view of some key features of Celtic Christian spirituality
- C) Critical issues in study.

## SOME DEFINITIONS

### What is spirituality?

Spirituality is that which concerns the human spirit as distinct from the purely materialistic view of life. It can encompass inward or transcendent experiences that help a person discover their essence, their values, or their connectedness to a larger reality. The Foundation for Holistic Spirituality defines spirituality as 'everyone's natural connection with the wonder and energy of nature and all existence.'

How would you define spirituality?  
*Email your two sentence answer to your tutor  
for information or for comment if the tutor  
thinks this appropriate.*

### What is Christian spirituality?

It is not theology. It is not a history of the church. Christian spirituality anchors this 'wonder and energy of nature and all existence' in meaning, values and habits informed by Christian revelation and experience. So although Christian spirituality is not history, Scripture or dogma, it draws insight from these.

### What is 'Celtic'?

Some **archaeologists** limit the term to artefacts found in La Tene, Switzerland and Hallstadt, in Austria.

Some **historians** limit its use to defining an ancient language group (its two main branches are Irish, Scottish and Manx (Goidelic) and Breton, Cornish and Welsh (Brythonic)).

In **politics** it is used to define the so-called six Celtic nations of Brittany, Cornwall, Ireland, Isle of Man, Scotland, Wales - and sometimes places such as Galicia in Spain. The inhabitants of these places and their continental forebears in the early

Christian period did not use the name ‘Celtic’ of themselves, but Roman writers, using Latin, did so describe them.

In early Roman times the Keltoi or Galatai (Galatians) lived in central Europe and what is now Turkey. In New Testament times the apostle Paul wrote to Celtic Galatians and John the Evangelist fostered churches among Celts in places such as Ephesus. After that Gaul was regarded by Roman writers as the Celts’ main settlement area. Gradually, as Romans and then settlers such as the Franks occupied their lands, Celts fled to the fringes of the Empire. The *Dictionary of Celtic Religion and Culture*, edited by Bernhard Maier (The Boydell Press 2000) is a mine of information.

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## **UNIT 2      BORDERLANDS**

### **To read**

Chapters 2 and 3 of *Exploring Celtic Spirituality*.

Chapter 1 of *Celtic Spirituality: Rhythm, Roots and Relationships* (Grove Books 2003)

### **After completing this unit you should be able to grasp**

- A) Ways in which early Celtic Christians moved beyond their comfort zones in dependence upon God.
- B) What it can mean for modern Christians to move habitually beyond their comfort zones.
- C) Some expressions of this in prayer and practice.

### **On the edge**

The word Borderland indicates a spirituality that is the opposite of the comfortable, the closed, the unadventurous, the unquestioned, the second-hand, the ossified or the artificial. It speaks of borderlands between earth and heaven, past and future, life and death, the status quo and the unfolding journey. It speaks of willingness to be open, vulnerable, in touch with the elements or, as Shirley Toulson quotes from Irenaeus in chapter 3, to be in a state of roadlessness – ‘complete trust in the direction of God rather than of human decision.’

Such a spirituality requires us to risk, to give all we have until we discover with the apostle Paul that God’s ‘strength is made complete in our weakness’ (2 Corinthians 12:9). It appeals to people today who wish to have cutting edge or adventure.

This spirituality has roots in the historical realities of early Christian Ireland. Those early Christians thought of themselves as being on the edge of the world. They were passionate wanderers, or ‘pilgrims for the love of God’. Anglo Saxon bishops forbade monks from wandering, but monks in Ireland continued to wander for some centuries after that.

They were inspired by the desert Christians who fled the comforts of cities and lived for God alone in the stark elements of the desert. Irish and British Christians created such desert places in their own lands.

**Columbanus** (d. 615 in Bobbio) wrote (in his fifth published sermon):

What then are you, human life? ...  
You are the road to life, not life itself ..  
You are to be traversed but not inhabited ...  
For no one dwells on a road, but travels it  
So that those who walk upon the road  
May dwell in their homeland.

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### **UNIT 3                      PRESENCE**

**To read**

Chapters 6, 13, 14 of *Exploring Celtic Spirituality*

**After completing this unit you should be able to grasp**

- A) What ‘a sense of presence’ meant for the first and more recent Celtic Christians.
- B) Some key texts which provide expressions of this.
- C) Ways of evoking this sense of presence for ourselves.

**An intense sense of presence**

In his book *Paths in Spirituality* Professor John Macquarrie identifies the key feature of Celtic spirituality as ‘an intense sense of presence’. He goes on to observe that ‘the Celt was very much a God-intoxicated man whose life was embraced on all sides by the divine Being’.

Quoted on page 32 of Ian Bradley’s *The Celtic Way*.

In his book *Chasing the Wild Goose* Ron Ferguson writes of the Celtic tradition: ‘The material is shot through with the spiritual, there is a “within-ness” of God in all of life. The whole earth is sacramental: everything is truly every blessed thing’.

This is orthodox Christian belief that stems from the twin doctrines of God’s Immanence and Incarnation. A mainstream church definition of a sacrament is ‘to see in visible things those things that are invisible’. Yet the vividness, freshness and range of God’s presence experienced in early Christian Ireland and sometimes in later Celtic traditions stands out

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## UNIT 5 LOVE OF THE POOR, JUSTICE AND HOSPITALITY

### To read

Chapters 7 and 19 of *Exploring Celtic Spirituality*

### After completing this unit you should be able to grasp

- A) Expressions of early Celtic Christians' love of the poor.
- B) Examples of early Celtic Christians' standing up for justice.
- C) Expressions of these things in contemporary Celtic movements.

#### TO DO

Look up sources for three examples of compassion towards the poor given in chapter 19:

The actions of Columba are recorded in Adomnan, of Aidan in Bede, and of Brigid in Cogitosus' *Life* (included in *Celtic Spirituality* edited by Oliver Davies).

- Monasteries typically provided meals for the poor – there are references to this in the monasteries of Brigid, David, Ninian and Columba among others.
- Within monasteries equality reigned. Although leadership was handed down within the founding aristocratic family, there was a common sharing of goods and tasks. A monk from a poor background was not discriminated against.
- Stories make clear that leaders of early Celtic communities in Britain and Ireland confronted rich and powerful people who mistreated poor employees. For example:

**Patrick** pleaded with the British Chief Coroticus to cease to kidnap Irish slaves.

**Brigid** pleaded with a tribal king to release from prison the family of one of his staff who had killed a fox that unknown to him was a royal pet.

**Columba** challenged and pronounced a curse on a rich farmer who took a poor farmer's cow.

**Aidan** *'neither sought nor cared for the possessions of this world, and he loved to give away to the poor the gifts he received from the rich... If wealthy people did wrong Aidan did not keep silence out of fear or favour, but would sternly correct them. He never gave money to influential people, only the hospitality of his table. He used money rich people gave him to buy the freedom of people who had been unjustly sold as slaves. Many of these later became disciples; after training and instructing them he ordained them.*

Based on the historian Bede

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## HOSPITALITY

A strong emphasis on kindness and hospitality pervades early Celtic literature. There is evidence of this in

- 1) The monastic practice of providing meals for pilgrims and the poor mentioned above;
  - 2) Prayers that see ‘Christ in the stranger’;
  - 3) Stories, such as Saint Brigid encouraging people to lay a spare place at a meal table, in case Christ came in the guise of a beggar
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## UNIT 7 POETRY AND ART

### To read

Chapter 11 of *Exploring Celtic Spirituality*

### When you have completed this unit you should be able to grasp

- 1) The role poets and poetry played in early Christian Celtic lands and in Northumbria
- 2) The significance of Illuminated Gospels in Celtic lands
- 3) Typical design in Celtic artifacts and high crosses and its meaning

## POETRY

### Columba and Early Irish poetry

A few Scottish scholars (example, Markus and Clancy in *Iona: the Earliest Poetry of a Celtic Monastery* Edinburgh University Press 1995) dismiss collections such as Jackson’s *Early Celtic Poetry* as the product of ‘armchair’ writers who were not typical of their people. However, there is an early record of a bard named Gemman presenting **St. Finnian** of Clonard (d. 549) (who taught many of ‘The Twelve Apostles of Ireland’) with a beautiful poem, in which many of his virtues were extolled. The bard asked not for money, but for fertility of produce in his lands. Finnian told him ‘Sing over water the hymn which you have composed, and sprinkle the land with that water.’ The bard did as he was directed, and it was said his land produced abundant fruit. (Finnian: *Irish Life*, ed. Whitley Stokes, *Lives of the Saints from the Book of Lismore*. Oxford 1890. Vol. 2.)

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## **UNIT 8      MANHOOD, DESERT ATHLETES AND LIVING MARTYRS**

### **To read**

Chapters 8 and 12 of *Exploring Celtic Spirituality*

### **After completing this unit you should be able to grasp**

- A) Ways in which early Celtic Christian men lived their manhood.
  - B) Why desert Christians were called Athletes of Christ.
  - C) The Irish understanding of martyrs
  - D) 'Celtic' principles and practices that modern men may apply.
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## **UNIT 9              WOMANHOOD, WISDOM AND NURTURE**

### **To read**

Chapters 15-17 and 20 of *Exploring Celtic Spirituality*

Chapter 3 of *Celtic Spirituality: Rhythm, Roots and Relationships*

### **After completing this unit you should be able to grasp**

- 1) The role of women in early Christian Celtic lands
- 2) Their understanding of wisdom
- 3) Celtic ways of fostering spiritual nurture.

Three questions that are often asked are; What place does Celtic Christianity give to 1) Women? 2) The Divine Feminine? 3) Wisdom?

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## **UNIT 10              AWARENESS OF HEAVEN**

### **To read**

Chapters 24 and 25 of *Exploring Celtic Spirituality*

Chapter 2 of *Celtic Spirituality: Rhythm, Roots and Relationships*

### **After completing this unit you should be able to grasp**

- A) Some 'Celtic' insights into ways of relating to death
  - B) Some 'Celtic' insights into ways of relating to angels
  - C) Some 'Celtic' insights into ways of relating to 'the communion of saints'.
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## **UNIT 11    COMMUNITY AND CHURCH, MISSION AND KINGDOM**

### **To read**

Chapters 1, 18, 21 to 23 of *Exploring Celtic Spirituality*

### **After completing this unit you should be able to grasp**

- A) Some key features of spirituality in early Celtic faith communities.
- B) Some principles relevant to community and faith building today.