

“Celtic Spirituality”

by Rev. Martin Woulfe
presented March 7, 2004

In a week or so, happy hordes of green clad revelers will be swilling and spilling tinted beer, belching out foreign phrases like, “Céad Míle Fáilte!” and butchering the chorus of “Danny Boy.” Someone will undoubtedly learn, for the very first time, that the word, “whisky” is Gaelic for “water of life” and they will think that profound. Now, while such moments may be said to be spirited, these are not the forms of Celtic spirituality of which I mean to speak today.

But as long as I’m on the topic of March 17, there are a few things I’d like to get out of my system, a few tidbits for you. St. Patrick was not Irish. He was Welsh. He was brought into Ireland as a young lad, as a slave. He escaped, converted to Christianity and returned many years later. According to tradition, he always wore blue. March 17 is not the anniversary of his date of birth, rather, following an old Christian tradition, that date marks the anniversary of his death.

In Ireland, March 17 is a solemn day, at least historically. Businesses, including the pubs, generally are closed. Families might go to mass, and then they spend much of the rest of the day together. Only quite recently has there been the addition of a parade in Dublin. And the parade is an innovation to accommodate the returning Americans, looking for an open pub and asking, “Where’s the parade?” The Irish are no fools; they know how to make a buck.

The reason why I want to speak on Celtic spirituality today – there are several reasons. The first is that I am conscious that there has been a grand revival of interest in Celtic culture -- we have been living for decades, perhaps three, in one of the great periods of Celtic revivalism. There have been many such revivals. The poem that I read by Yeats was in the last great Celtic revival, and that was spearheaded, not by the commoners, but by the aristocrats, by the learned class, the Protestant Irish.

But the current Irish renaissance, you can detect it in some of the books which are so popular, in the music, in the movies. I’ll mention several. There was the *Mists of Avalon*, published in 1982, which is filled with much Irish and Celtic imagery. There were the movies *Braveheart* and *Rob Roy*, both released in 1995; the spectacles of *Riverdance*, in 1994, followed by *Lord of the Dance*, and more recently *The Lord of the Rings* movies which are positively brimming with Celtic symbolism. And of course we are probably familiar with such musicians as The Chieftains, U2, Sinéad O’Connor, Clannad, Chris de Burgh – these are just a few among many musical acts, far too numerous to name. But it truly is an Irish renaissance in which we are living.

I also think it’s a relevant topic for us to consider because there has been a curious development within liberal religion, also during the last several decades. You

may be aware the Unitarian-Universalism is, historically, the great White Anglo Saxon Protestant (WASP) movement within American religion. And there's a certain irony that there has been a renaissance of Celtic spirituality within this movement. But that influx parallels the influx of many former Catholics who have left that faith tradition and have come into this one. It has been what is sometimes called, a "learning and stretching" experience. There are certain rituals, such as the lighting of candles such as we did earlier, which would have been positively unheard of, fifty years ago, but are now common in many of our worship services. And that is because many former Catholics, many people who identify themselves as coming from a Celtic tradition, have a love of ritual which they have brought into this tradition. Another reason for the present revival of Celtic spirituality within UUism is because of the neo-pagan movement. It has been my observation that many, if not most, neo-pagans do come from either a former Catholic or to a lesser extent, an Episcopalian background. Such people typically revolted against a patriarchal hierarchy and theology, but they kept their love of sacrament, of ritual, of beauty. Many of their former assumptions of the spiritual nature of the world are still there, renamed, perhaps, rechristened, if you'll pardon the pun, into something more palpable with modern UUism.

All right – I've got that out of my system! So let me proceed with a few observations about Celtic spirituality, but not so fast. You'll note that I've spoken alternately of Irish and Celtic as if they are synonymous. This is not exactly true. Celtic spirituality is a huge topic. If we had several hours, I might do it justice. We do not have several hours, so I'm bound to fail. That which is deemed Celtic historically is identified with the people who spoke the Celtic languages: Welsh, ancient Gaelic, and modern Irish. You will find their descendants in Spain, Ireland, Wales, Brittany, Scotland, and no doubt other places.

But which should be the defining areas of Celtic spirituality to consider? It's a vast history. If we're going to speak of Celtic spirituality, we could speak of the age before the Druids, the age of the Druids, earliest Christianity (which followed the Eastern rite, now called the Orthodox Church) or later Christianity, which was the Roman version, or still later, when it was Catholic Christianity, for centuries. Should we focus on particular incidents, such as the massacre by Edward the First, called Longshanks, (he was the villain in *Braveheart*) of all the Welsh bards. His notion was to invite all the bards to a large celebration. He understood that the bards were the keepers of religion and tradition – and so he extended his invitation, many of the bards went, and they were all executed. Should we perhaps speak of "The Hunger," or the political developments, the upheavals? As I said before, it's a vast topic. I'm mindful that there's an old saying, that that which is truly particular, is also universal. And so for the purposes of this day, when I speak of Celtic spirituality, it will be as it must be: funneled through my own eyes, my own experience, through my own prejudices.

To put my remarks into their proper context, let me share a couple of things about myself. Most of you aware that I was born into an Irish Catholic family on the south side of Chicago. Being Irish was very important in my upbringing, listening to

Irish music, attempting to do an Irish dance. But it was also true that in my late teen years I was in open rebellion against my family's inheritance, my Catholic inheritance, my Irish-ness. When I'm being charitable, I would call it a lover's quarrel. My family, at the time though, would probably use stronger language. And yet because of this quarrel, nearly a quarter of a century ago, I was inspired to cross the ocean and to live for one year in Ireland as a student abroad. And I carried my private internal war, my struggle, to that ancestral island, where I hoped to confront my ancestors, if you will, my inherited identity, the myths, the tradition and the superstitions at its very source. And I was determined to either force it to come to terms – my terms – or perhaps to make peace.

What I discovered, both in my time in Ireland and from processing those events decades afterward, is that Celtic spirituality has a promise that reality and mythology are intersected, interwoven. Dreams, visions, poetry, mythology are just as real, just as tangible, as the morning newspaper. Neither is wholly independent of one another; they inform one another. It's also been part of my growing experience to understand that there is a connection between the present and the far distant past – call it the larger history or mythology. In English, we call that island Ireland – literally, the land of the Irish. In their native tongue, which is now called Irish, the land is known as 'Eire', and the people of it are ni h'Eireann, the people of Eire. And Eire is not the same as 'Eire-land'. Rather, Eire refers to the last queen of the elves, who according to mythology warned the humans that a great war was brewing between her people, the little people, and that the streams would run red with their blood. And that that sign would mark the end of the age of elves. After which, the island would be inhabitable for people.

And you will find many prehistoric remnants from the early peoples to remember that early mythology. I remember walking with guides and inevitably we would find a small circle of stones that they would call the 'fairy rings'. Even today, they litter the island. The wells are sacred. The rivers are sacred. The mountains are sacred. And the people take great pause when they encounter these, no matter how Catholic, how Christian, how orthodox, because this is part of their ancestry, this is something to be respected. Here's a short story:

Some years ago there was an airport to be built at Shannon. The fields of that airport had fairy rings in them, the little stone circles. The native workers refused to disturb the soil. It would have brought bad luck. And so eventually the contractors found foreign workers – I'm told that they came from Japan – who did not know the local traditions -- to come and disrupt all the fields so that the airport could be built.

There is a mystique to the land: the land is sacred, the land is holy. In Celtic spirituality they celebrate that. And nature is seen as something beautiful, and so if you are going to worship nature, you must also seek to create something of beauty. And you see this in their artwork through the centuries. You hear it in their tunes and melodies. You hear it in their poetry. That which is beautiful is good. That which is good is beautiful. There is less emphasis on saying, "This is specifically true." The

question is, “Is it good? Is it beautiful?” And so beauty and goodness are a hallmark of Celtic spirituality.

And I mentioned that nature is considered alive. Every thing is alive: every blade of grass, every tree, every stone, every drop of water. It’s understood that there’s an inherent sense of life that pervades all of creation. This theological sentiment is called pantheism. What is pantheism? It’s what I just described: that every tree, every rock, every hill has its own sense of life, its own identity. The moon is alive. But there are also the Celts who have leaned towards what we might call panatheism, which is a term for the belief that everything is alive (like pantheism) but with the further notion that all life merges into one greater life force, much like what the Hindus believe. And because “all-that-is” is alive, there is a reverence for life itself. Thus, all nature is alive, and holy. In fact, you and I are also incarnations of the divine.

Historically, one of the hallmarks of Celtic spirituality is that there is great equality between men and women. You don’t find that in every tribal tradition. Men and women are basically equal, inherently equal. And yet there is a hierarchy. But it’s a hierarchy not based upon gender; it is based upon merit, in particular, knowledge, knowledge and levels of initiation. It is so important, even to this day, for the Irish to be educated, to be more and more initiated into the ways of knowledge, because knowledge brings authority, prestige, power, as well as wisdom. And thus it was that someone like Bridget was as esteemed as Patrick; a queen, Maeve, was as esteemed as Brian Boru. High stature was something that any person could achieve – if they were willing to invest themselves accordingly.

There is also a strong streak of Mysticism within Celtic Spirituality. Sometimes the connection has lent itself to overstatement – for example, I have a cartoon from *The New Yorker*, from the 1950’s. It features a man and woman sitting at a table. The man is obviously drunk. The woman says to him, “Well of course you’re a mystic, Murphy! All Irishmen are mystics!”

In truth, mysticism is the heart and soul of Celtic spirituality. I mentioned before that all of nature is considered alive and that reverence for life is paramount. Unlike other forms of spirituality, the human race is not considered estranged from nature. We are very much a part of nature. And we are connected not with just the present, but all that was, all that is and all that is to come. So there is no taint of original sin in the old Celtic faith. There is no sense of fallen-ness, because, again, nature is good. As we are a part of nature, we too, are good. But there’s another sense of mystical element and its connection with the generations, the generations of one’s own family. In my wallet - I pulled these out for today - I have two things. This is a very old, worn, out of date ‘punt’ note – ‘punt’ is the Irish word for ‘pound’. It’s carries a picture of Maeve, Celtic designs and some words from the *Book of Kells*. Also, I have a small piece of gold, a four leaf clover. This was carried by my grandfather and when he died, it was one of the things that was given to me. I carry these because I wish, like my ancestors, to be connected to the generations, to the

clan. It is a source of identity, a source of strength, a source of meaning. And I know that it stretches back to the mists of antiquity. In Celtic spirituality you are never alone. You walk with your ancestors. And it's interesting how people make connections and how people in your own clan will embrace you, once they know who you are.

When I was in Ireland, I went to visit my cousins, my third cousins, near the town of Portumna, in Galway. I went uninvited and unannounced. I was family; I didn't need to call ahead. At least, it didn't occur to me that it would be civil of me to let them know that I was coming. I took it as a given that I could go and I would be welcome. I found my way to their farm and I knocked on their door. My third cousin opened the door. She looked at the rather mud-spattered man on the doorstep. I probably said hello and so she figured. "It's a Yank." Then she looked a little closer and she said, "You're Molly's brother." (My sister had spent a year in Ireland, the year before.) She said, "You're Molly's brother. You have her eyes. Please come in."

Family. The clan, the generations. And that sense of connection is not only with the living. It's also a reverence for the dead, because in that spirituality the dead are not really gone. Perhaps they're mouldering in the grave, but they're really only sleeping. We are the present incarnation of the clan. Those who have passed on still exist and they can be called upon, especially in times of trouble.

You may know that Celtic spirituality often makes use of charms. You can also curse, and you usually do both through your ancestors. If you've ever spoken to your car, on a cold day, asking it to please turn over – if you've ever asked the spirits of the room to help you find your car keys, you are participating in something not unlike Celtic spirituality at that level. But the spirits of the generations can also be messengers that bear more important news. Perhaps you've heard of the banshees. The banshees are the spirit of the dead, your family's dead. And typically they come to visit you on the eve of the death of someone in your family. I had a friend whom I knew well in college, who had a dream in which her grandmother came and announced such a death, and it was the day before another family member died. And those things are not sneered at, no matter how rationalist the person is. You can't explain it. It makes you stop and consider your assumptions about what is real in the universe.

And you do not disturb the dead. Outside of Dublin city, there is a large mound, a burial mound. On my first visit to Dublin, the man who is now my brother-in-law pointed it out to me. And he mentioned that there were Vikings buried there, following a great battle. My first reaction was, "Well, why don't they excavate it?" And he said, "We don't do that. We know they're there. We leave them in peace." A few weeks later I was going on a tour, and I climbed atop a great dolmen. A dolmen is a stone monument from prehistoric times, great stones piled on top of each other to mark the grave of some great chief. My guide brought me to it and like a typical tourist, my impulse was to climb to the top. And so I did. And I promptly slipped off and fell. And my guide said, "They don't like that. You shouldn't do that!"

ALUUC Sermon Transcript

Those are some of the basic characteristics. Again, if I had more time, there would be others that I'd explore more in depth. But I think these are some of the defining characteristics, regardless of whether it's Celtic spirituality from Ireland, Wales or Scotland. But I think there's a greater question to be asked: why this revival now? What can we learn from this revival about ourselves?

I believe that there is a revival in Celtic spirituality and in things that are Celtic because we, the present, ache for a life with rituals, and also ache for a life filled with mythology, something to ground us, something to lend meaning to our existence, something, perhaps, to steer us towards what we would call 'wholeness,'

Perhaps we are instinctively yearning for a more heroic age. We have technology. We have scientific advances. But I think that many of us feel that our lifetimes are squandered in petty details, meaningless work. We watch the news and we see that the planet's resources are being ravaged. We see that there is much political and religious strife, and daily murders, all in the name of that which is to said to be holy, and it revolts us. And so we yearn for something simpler, something more magical, something more mythological.

Why Celtic spirituality? Well, as we watch the daily procession of murders, we are aware that the Celts had less blood on their hands than many other peoples, relatively speaking. We are very aware of the bloody tapestry of modern life. And when we look back on their wars, we see more often than not that they were raids to steal cattle, perhaps women. They did not practice genocide. There were no wars of imperialism. When they were fighting, it often seemed that they were fighting for a nobler cause, for freedom or self-determination.

This revival begs the question "Is this merely a romantic reaction?" If so, how are we different from the aristocrats in France, inspired by Rousseau and his tales of a noble savage? In response to Rousseau, the aristocrats of France built small villages on their estates. They dressed in rags and played the peasant, to embrace what they called the noble savage life. And they continued to play and they continued to ignore what was going on around them, until the revolution came and they were all promptly beheaded. Is it merely a refuge from the terrors of reality? Is it something only to give us solace in a world gone mad? Or, is it actually a genuine authentic spiritual resource, one that will rekindle one's inner strength, so that one can stand tall and challenge the human forces that ravage this planet and our civilization? Time will tell.

I think that another reason for the present revival is that we moderns ache for a sense of mystery. We ache for memories in connection with the past. We ache for a sense of salvation in community, the type of which is promised in this kind of spirituality, where family and the extensions of family are all important. As we heard in the children's focus, there much racism in the world today. We also know that there is much classism. There are many forces at work that draw people apart, that separate people, that exploit people. Is Celtic spirituality a path, to draw a broader

ALUUC Sermon Transcript

circle around humanity, to embrace all humanity and all life? I think it really depends on the individual. I know that it informs my spirituality. I'm not going to judge how another person uses Celtic spirituality. I'm not going to judge how the larger culture draws upon Celtic spirituality. I hope that we do find strength in this, or whichever particular path brings you strength, because our task, like the Celts of the Dark Ages, the Dark Ages when the Roman empire collapsed in Western Europe is that we are called to bring the light of truth, beauty and goodness, to bring that beacon and to relight all those lamps that have gone out in this bruised and hurting world. But I believe it must – like any other spiritual path – give us strength to step out of our own private selves and address the greater evils that affect our civilization. To the extent that we succeed, I think that Celtic spirituality is powerful and that it can serve a great purpose.