



Celtic Christianity: Scotland

| *How did Christianity come to Celtic Scotland, and what can we learn from this history?*

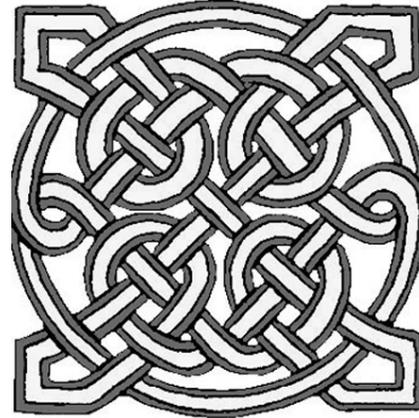
Introduction

Celtic Christianity can be understood as the Christianity that flowered in Celtic lands from the sixth to the eighth centuries and whose literature and traditions persisted in some form at least through the nineteenth century. This study will focus on Scotland and its rich history of saints, controversy, and conversion.

We will get a very brief crash course on Scotland's beginnings. Then we will look at Columba, "a wanderer for Christ," who is credited with spreading Christianity throughout northern Britain. We will examine an event in England that had an important role to play in the evolution of all of Celtic Christianity: the Synod of Whitby. Finally, the Christian folk traditions of nineteenth-century Scottish farmers will give us a glimpse into the continued significance of saints in Celtic Christianity. While some of this may seem remote from your experience, there are connections between Columba's tight-knit clusters of monasteries and our modern denominations; the controversy at Whitby relates to contemporary ecumenical dialogue; and the simple story of a farmer sheds light on the communion of saints. Our journey covers about two thousand years, and we will touch only a small part of the rich tapestry of Celtic Christianity in Scotland. Perhaps you'll find a thread you want to follow further and weave into your own fabric of faith.

Who Were the Ancient Scots?

It makes sense to assume that the Scots were the original inhabitants of what we now call Scotland (northern Britain). Yet, things are rarely that straightforward when we are talking about the history of ancient cultures. Irish raiders, many from the northern Irish tribal dynasty Dál Riata, attacked the west of Britain before



the fifth century. In time, they established the kingdom of Dál Riata in Argyll (southwestern coast and islands north of the Forth in Scotland—the Forth line is an imaginary line that links the Firth of Forth near Edinburgh in the east and the Firth of Clyde near modern Glasgow in the west).

People called the Picts inhabited the land north of the Forth for the first half of the first millennium. Who were the Picts? The Latin *Picti* means "painted ones," so it is thought that their people were often tattooed. The traditions of the Picts are still a mystery to scholars because the groups who conquered or assimilated them wiped out much of their culture and language. They spoke two languages, Celtic and another that is not fully understood. By the ninth century, the Picts' cultural impact had ended, and other than some metalwork and carved stones, little remains to tell us about their history and culture.

Scotland Becomes a Nation

In 843, Kenneth MacAlpin of the Scottish Dál Riata conquered a vital part of Pictish territory, creating a new kingdom known by ca. 900 as Alba (from the Irish word

THE SCOTTI

The name for Scotland actually comes from Irish people called the Scotti. The word stems from the Irish word for “raiders.”

for Britain) or Scotia. Kenneth is considered the first king of the united kingdom of “Scotland.” By the end of the wars of independence against England (1296–1328), Scotland’s geographical boundaries and national identity were developed. There was still diversity, however. The Lowlands (the south, from just north of the Forth) were largely English speaking, and the Highlands and Islands to the north and west were Gaelic speaking. There is, of course, much more worth exploring about the history of Scotland, but for our purposes, we will stop here.

Who Brought Christianity to Scotland?

Although many look to a sixth-century man called Columba as the missionary to Scotland, tradition holds that a bishop named Ninian founded a small church at Whithorn (southwest Scotland) early in the fifth century. It is important to pause and think about how early this is in Christian history. Only about a hundred years earlier, Emperor Constantine converted to Christianity, and the canon (the official books) of the Christian Bible was decided. Ninian’s work seems to have influenced territory south of the Forth, which was heavily British or Anglo-Saxon until the end of the first millennium. Also, Whithorn lacked the influence of Columba’s Iona as a center of missionary, artistic, liturgical, and scholarly activity. So, it’s understandable that Columba is more customarily credited with spreading Christianity through Scotland and northern England.

Columba

Columba was born around 521 in County Donegal in the northwest of Ireland. Yes, Columba was Irish, not Scottish in the modern sense of the word. Also known as Colum Cille, meaning “dove of the church,” he was a monk and priest from a “good family” in Ireland—part of the Uí Néill royal house. Whether he prayed for the wrong side or instigated the tragic, bloody encounter, something happened concerning a battle in 561, and a

year later Columba was excommunicated by a gathering of Irish clergy from the region that was defeated in the battle.

It is hard to say if he was fleeing or simply following the call of God, but in 563 Columba set out from Ireland with twelve companions in a small wood-framed leather boat called a coracle. Guided by God and the waves, they were wanderers for Christ, *peregrini*, in keeping with the Irish Christian tradition of “white martyrdom.” Unlike “red martyrdom,” which was about bloodshed, this was about the self-denial of leaving home and kin for God—a very painful sacrifice for a people so focused on family and tribe. We may be able to relate to giving ourselves to God’s directing hand, but for most of us, this is a metaphor. For Columba and other Celtic monks who traveled for Christ, it was a physical journey where they let God lead their coracle to the place God wanted.

In Columba’s case, the journey led to the small isle of Iona (off the larger island of Mull on the west coast of Scotland). Though later tradition holds that Columba and his friends came straight from Ireland to Iona, reliable written sources say that they first stopped at the court of the king of Dál Riata in Scotland. The king apparently gave the island of Iona to Columba for the foundation of a monastery. Does this mean that Columba did not let God steer, or is it possible that God led him to the king? In either case, Columba’s political and familial connections helped him to identify and then solidify Iona as a monastic center and to reach out in mission.

After establishing the Iona monastery, Columba returned to Ireland numerous times, where he founded a monastery at Durrow, among others. Even if they were separated by hundreds of miles, monasteries founded by the same person or his or her successors continued to be bound to one another. These groupings of monasteries are called *familia*, and they served as the hierarchical structure of early Celtic Christianity rather than geographical regions such as dioceses. When Columba died on June 9, 597, his successor as leader (abbot) was his cousin, and the pattern of close ties with Columba’s branch of the Uí Néill clan appears to continue for generations. Some of what we know about Columba comes from a saint’s life written about eighty-five years after Columba’s death by the ninth abbot of Iona, Adamnan.

While the one-mile by three-mile island of Iona may seem insignificant and remote today, its location was an asset to Columba. The lack of good roads at that time meant that the island had relatively easy access by sea to Ireland, the coastal mainland of what we now call Scotland, and even on to Europe. These geographical and political connections proved fruitful when the king of Northumbria helped make possible the founding of a monastery of the Columban *familia* on the tidal island of Lindisfarne in 635. Iona sent Aidan (who was Irish) to serve as the first bishop, and “the Holy Island of Lindisfarne” became a strong center of scholarship, theological influence, and artistic achievement in its own right. Even so, it continued to look to the authority of the Columban *familia* for centuries.

The Synod of Whitby in 664: Big Changes in Celtic Christianity?

In the seventh century, political intrigue mixed with theological loyalty to make a sometimes-confusing brew. In Northumbria, tension built within the royal family about whether Lindisfarne and other monasteries should follow continental/European practices or continue to follow their own Irish/Columban way of dating Easter. Although this controversy is sometimes portrayed as a “Celtic versus Roman” debate, there is evidence that by the seventh century some monasteries in southern Ireland had begun to date Easter the way it was calculated on the continent (including Rome), but the monasteries of the Columban *familia* dated it as they had since their beginnings.

To settle the dispute, the king of Northumbria called a synod, a gathering of religious representatives from the region. They met at Hilda’s monastery at Whitby on the coast of northern England in 664. The eighth-century English historian Bede gives an account of the discussion. After much debate by religious representatives, the king decided to follow the continental way of dating Easter and the manner of cutting monks’ hair (called a tonsure, the Irish/Celtic one was shaved from ear to ear and the Roman was the more familiar circle or halo around the head). Haircuts and choosing dates for holidays seem to be trivial matters for an illustrious gathering of clergy elite. But this was about who decides, who has authority. Should religious communities far from Rome still be looking to the pope for all authority, or could they follow some of their own traditions?

Some point to the decision to follow the Roman way as the end of Celtic Christianity. But it would be almost fifty years before the Iona monastery would date Easter according to the Roman method. Yes, it was a change, but Christians in Ireland and Scotland continued to express distinctive beliefs and practices for centuries.

In today’s disputes not only within Catholicism but in most religious traditions, the question arises of who gets to decide which beliefs and practices are acceptable—orthodoxy and orthopraxis. How far can one congregation or individual go before it gets pulled back into conformity with, or thrown out of, its denomination? Much depends on the theology and governance of a tradition. “Free” or congregational traditions (for example, Baptists, United Church of Christ) often have a high tolerance for congregational beliefs and practices in their denominations. But even these traditions set limits on congregations who wish to be identified with the denomination.

God in the Everyday

After ninth-century Viking raids, the monasteries of Scottish Celtic Christianity gradually became more closely tied with the continent through medieval orders such as the Benedictines and Dominicans. Nevertheless, Christian faith and practice in Scotland continued to reflect distinctive elements from its Celtic Christian past. The sixteenth-century Protestant Reformation brought many changes to Scotland’s Christians. Yet, whether pastored by Presbyterian ministers or Catholic priests, much of the rural Gaelic-speaking Highlands and Islands continued to practice religious traditions passed on from earlier generations.

As a result, some prayers and folk traditions of the nineteenth century were considered unorthodox by clergy of the day and perhaps seem strange to us. Alexander Carmichael’s collection of prayers from the oral tradition of the Highlands and Islands contains some prayers that may seem superstitious to many modern Christians. Yet, the six hundred poems and prayers in *Carmina Gadelica* (“Gaelic Prayers/Hymns”) show a world in which God orders all of life. God is present and works through the elements (sun, moon, and so on), plants, animals, and other people. The believer can participate in God’s order for protection and fulfillment.

Part of God's ordering is the presence of God's holy people and angels. Along with Mary (Jesus' mother), the archangel Michael, and Bride/Brigit, Columba figures largely in *Carmina* as a source of prayers and presence to help the believer. An example of the content of *Carmina* follows:

Isabel MacEachainn from the island of Mull (near Iona) told Carmichael the story of a widow from Mull who had a sick cow (a very serious matter for a poor sharecropper/crofter). She was wringing her hands with worry. "At that moment she saw Calum Cille, Columba, and his twelve disciples in their little boat rowing home to Iona. The widow ran down to the *rudha* [point], and hailed Calum Cille, and asked him to heal her cow. Calum Cille never turned a dull ear to the poor, to the penitent, or to the distressed, and he came ashore and made the *ora* [prayer] to the white cow, and the white cow rose upon her feet and shook herself and began to browse upon the green grass before her.

'Go thou home, *brònag*, and have faith in the God who made thee and in Christ the Saviour who loved thee and died for thee, and in thine own self, and all will go well with thee and with thy cow.'" Having said this, Columba resumed his journey back to Iona. Isabel says, "There was no one like Calum Cille, no one, my dear. He was big and handsome and eloquent, haughty to the over-haughty and humble to the humble, kind, kind to the weak and the wounded."¹

The communion of the saints takes on a new meaning in this context. Here is a robust saint most of us would want around! The fact that the story takes place in the woman's home territory is no surprise. *Carmina* is full of stories where the saints, the Holy Family, even the three persons of the Trinity inhabit the farms, homes, and hearths of believers. Modern Christians can learn from this. Christ and believers before us are not long dead and absent. They are seen in everyday life. Jesus sits by our bed when we go to sleep. Mary and Joseph were seen walking through the neighborhood the other day. Even if the veneration of saints is not part of your tradition, can you picture a beloved teacher in the faith sitting across the kitchen table? What would he or she say? Most Christians affirm that they believe in the communion of the saints—what does that mean to you?

Twenty-First-Century Celtic Christians?

While there are contemporary Scottish Christians who speak Celtic languages, they may or may not feel any connection to the Christianity in Carmichael's *Carmina*, let alone reflect the traditions of the sixth century! But there is an undeniable interest in the rich traditions from Scotland and Ireland, and some see themselves as inheritors of Celtic Christianity even if they have no connection to Celtic lands. If you are an enthusiast, take time to look for evidence from original sources that support the claims being made by authors. If you are a skeptic, entertain how the authentic expressions of this tradition might inform your faith.

If you would like to do further reading, several texts are available in translation online (for example, Adamnan's *Life of St. Columba*—<http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/basis/columba-e.html>; part of *Carmina Gadelica*—<http://www.smo.uhi.ac.uk/gaidhlig/corpus/Carmina/>). The modern ecumenical Christian Iona Community (<http://www.iona.org.uk/>), the Northumbria Community (<http://www.northumbriacommunity.org/>), and others are contemporary expressions of Christianity with a conscious connection to a Celtic past.

Philip Newell's books examine themes of Celtic Christianity with a high value for mysticism. Thomas O'Loughlin's and Oliver Davies's works have a strong academic backbone but are still fairly accessible. Remember to look at the credentials of the author as well as whether he or she references original sources. This will help you sift through the fluff and find material that is both authentic and inspiring. May you find fresh perspectives that inform your faith journey in the literature and tradition of Celtic Christianity!

About the Writer

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Endnote

1. Alexander Carmichael, *Carmina Gadelica* (Aurora, CO: Lindisfarne Press, 2004), 655–56.