

ABSTRACT

Whitby, Wilfrid, and Church-State Antagonism in Early Medieval Britain

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In 664, adherents of the Dionysian and Celtic-84 Easter tables gathered at the Northumbrian abbey of Whitby to debate the proper calculation of Easter. The decision to adopt the former, with its connections to the papacy, has led many to frame this encounter in terms of Roman religious imperialism and to posit a break between the ecclesiastical culture of Northumbria prior to the Synod of Whitby and afterward. This study will propose a different interpretation of the change that took place in the Northumbrian Church after 664. Rather than focusing solely on matters of religion, this project will seek also to demonstrate Whitby's political implications. Instead of the end of alienation between the Celtic Church and the balance of Christendom, the Synod of Whitby will be identified, in the person of its main protagonist Wilfrid, as the beginning of alienation between the Northumbrian state and the hierarchy of the Church.

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in Early Medieval Britain

by

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

- AC* *Anonymous Life of St. Cuthbert*
- ASC* *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*
- EH* *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*
- LC* *Life of St. Cuthbert*
- LCol* *Life of St. Columban*
- LCon* *Life of Constantine*
- LP* *Life of Patrick*
- LSC* *Life of St. Columba*
- LW* *Life of Wilfrid*

CHAPTER ONE

Introduction: The Development of a Myth

In recent years, the study of the medieval Celtic Church has become something of a tug of war between proponents of the popular Celtic Christian myth on one side and those who wish to debunk that myth on the other. The former acknowledge little interest in or need for the latter, who seem to have little time or use for the former. From the popular perspective, ideas are paramount and context is not of great importance, while in the estimation of the academics involved one cannot accurately understand ideas until their context has been determined. Facing one another across this epistemic divide, neither group has benefited much from the valuable contributions each has made to the ongoing debate.

At the heart of this disjunction looms the Synod of Whitby. Because of increased contact between the northern isles and the European continent at the turn of the seventh century, conflict over the correct observance of Easter, which had been a matter of dispute since the early days of imperial Christianity, flared up once again. While a good portion of what has come to be known as the Easter Controversy was addressed elsewhere, for many defenders of Celtic Christianity the key battle in that war was waged in 664, at a Northumbrian abbey called Whitby. In this cliffside church, representatives of the Celtic-84 and the Dionysian Easter tables met to argue the merits of each faction's method of determining the date of this most important of Christian festivals. Led by a priest named Wilfrid, a cleric of Northumbrian stock who had become

fascinated with the history and power of the Roman See, the Dionysians presented the winning argument, and swayed by Wilfrid's persuasive speech, Oswy, king of Northumbria, decreed that thereafter the entire Northumbrian Church would celebrate Easter according to the Dionysian table.

Many, however, perceive a darker motive than doctrinal purity underlying this fateful interchange. Instead of the theology of Easter, the authority of Rome has been placed at the center of the Whitby proceedings; in retrospect, accusations of power-mongering and religious imperialism have been levelled at the medieval Roman Church. Meanwhile, in place of the Celtic-84 Easter table stands a unified Church of the Celts, transformed from sparring partner into helpless victim, unable to protect itself from the predatory action of the Holy See. In light of this conceptual transformation, all the perquisites of victimhood—innocence, purity of heart and faith, and many other hallmarks of a pristine spirituality—have been conferred liberally upon the hapless Celts, to the detriment of Roman Christianity, which equally has been tarred with a traitor's brush. What in reality was a doctrinal dispute within the Christian Church has developed in the popular imagination into a power struggle between two foreign churches: in one corner an old, tired Roman institution bent upon the monopolization of the faith, in the other a youthful, vibrant ecclesial community that only wished to be left alone to practice its unspoiled version of Christianity in peace.

Seeking evidence of this titanic struggle, many have observed in the years following the Synod of Whitby a fundamental change in the workings of the Northumbrian Church, and this change has been interpreted as diagnostic of the Celtic world as a whole. Contrasting sharply with the pastoral picture presented in the third book of Bede's *Historia Ecclesiastica*—at whose heart stood the friendship and heartfelt

cooperation between Oswald the king and Aidan the monk-bishop—is the image of disarray and disharmony which emerges in Eddius Stephanus’ biography of Wilfrid, the leader of the Dionysians at Whitby. From 678, the Northumbrian Church was characterized by excommunications, underhanded councils, arbitrary depositions, and repeated appeals to Rome. At the epicenter of this chaotic estate, in bleak counterpoint to the warmth which had characterized the union between Aidan and Oswald, lay the antagonism which defined Wilfrid’s relationship with his royal contemporaries, Ecgfrith and Aldfrith. The reality of this altered estate is undeniable, and to many the blame for its development falls squarely on the shoulders of the Church of Rome, whose corrupting influence may be traced back to Whitby and Wilfrid’s victorious defense.

To an extent, this accusation stands: the changes which took place in the Northumbrian Church in the years following 664 did come as an indirect result of the Synod of Whitby. They are changes, however, which must be defined carefully. The concept of “Romanization” so frequently applied to the Whitby episode is misleading; it assumes a complete dissociation between the Celtic and continental ecclesiastical traditions prior to that gathering. Forced isolation brought on by the withdrawal of Roman troops in 410, this theory holds, developed over time into an elective isolation, which created in Britain and Ireland a Christianity both theologically and doctrinally distinct from its continental counterpart—in essence, a Christendom unto itself. Upon closer inspection, this theory of Celtic separatism begins to destabilize: while some structural and practical distinctives did emerge within the northern Church (as in many other parts of the early medieval world) due to factors both sociological and geographical, there was at the same time a strong bond of tradition uniting it with the broader Christian community, in Gaul, in Rome, and beyond.

It is the structural distinctiveness—rather than any confessional variation—which grew up in the Irish Church of the late sixth and early seventh centuries that holds the key to the Northumbrian Church’s break from its irenic, Oswaldian past. The lack of imperial influence in Ireland, coupled with the absence of an urban element in Irish society, in some cases rendered the continental diocesan system obsolete, and in these instances an episcopal structure emerged which was highly mobile and to an extent subject to the monastic discipline of local abbots, who were sometimes bishops themselves. This is the system which Aidan took with him to Northumbria in 635. Wilfrid, on the other hand, enamored as he was with Rome and its hierarchy, brought to the table a more substantial episcopal sensibility; much more than his Celtic predecessors, he identified himself with the landholdings of the Church, and with the authority of his position both within and without the walls of the medieval abbey. In the early years of the Northumbrian Church, the bishop had been a spiritual ally of the royal house; under Wilfrid, he became its political rival. This new episcopal identity brought Wilfrid into direct and violent conflict with the Northumbrian state.

This is the true significance of the Synod of Whitby. At its core, the Church of the Isles was not distinct from, but an extension of, the broader medieval Church: its theology, its doctrine, the Fathers to whom it turned for inspiration and direction, even its emphasis on monastic discipline (supposedly its most distinctive trait) all came from beyond its shores. The gathering in 664 did not deny this relationship; rather, it confirmed its existence. What changed at Whitby was not the relationship between Celt and Christendom, between an insular Church and a Roman. Instead, the substantive change was in the relationship between the Northumbrian state and its ecclesiastical counterpart, between the royal throne, the episcopal seat, and the papal See. In the

person and sensibilities of Wilfrid, whose entry onto the Northumbrian stage was facilitated by his role at the Synod of Whitby, the rulers of the English detected a threat to their own position and authority. In essence, therefore, the changes which took place in post-Whitby Northumbria were not primarily religious, but political.

A Brief Historiography

In 1981, Kathleen Hughes of Cambridge University published what would become a seminal study in the field of Celtic Christianity. In her article, “The Celtic Church: Is This a Valid Concept,” Hughes called into question the existence of a Christianity which might be viewed as the special province of the Celtic race, a monolithic Church set apart and identified by a distinct set of beliefs and practices common to all corners of the Celtic world:

Writers talk about “the Celtic Church.” This must mean that the various branches of the Celtic church had certain features in common—ideas like penance and pilgrimage, styles of building and carving and manuscript illumination, comparable libraries and intellectual training. Most obvious of all, they must have shared the same peculiar ecclesiastical organization, based on monastic *paruchia*—but did they?¹

Based upon structural differences she discovered between the Church in Ireland and the neighboring Church in Wales—the former being divided regionally by the seventh-century into abbatial and episcopal areas of authority, and the latter dominated exclusively by its bishops—Hughes was forced to conclude that “the ‘Celtic Church’ is...a rather misleading phrase.” Instead, the Celtic world appeared to have been as segmented in its practice of religion as was the rest of the early medieval world.²

¹ Kathleen Hughes, “The Celtic Church: Is This a Valid Concept?”, *Cambridge Medieval Celtic Studies* 1 (summer 1981): 1, 1-20. See also Caitlin Corning, *The Celtic and Roman Traditions: Conflict and Consensus in the Early Medieval Church* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), xii.

² Hughes, 15.

This was a watershed moment in the historiography of Celtic Christianity. During the English and Scottish reformations of the sixteenth century, Catholics and Protestants fought publicity wars over rights of appropriation to the Celtic Christians, but none questioned the historical accuracy of the concept itself.³ At the height of its Victorian popularity—during which period the stories of the northern saints formed a solid undercurrent in philosophical, fictional, and dramatic works, and provided the world with a new generation of Celtic hagiographers—scholars were divided in their appreciation of the Celtic Church, but its existence was assumed by all.⁴ In the last quarter of the nineteenth century, men like Alfred Fryer and pedagogical ventures such as the Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge churned out a number of new “biographies” of the Celtic saints, generally a mixture of inference and block quotes from Bede, in an attempt to reconstruct a broader picture of Irish and Northumbrian Christianity.⁵ Fryer and his contemporaries accepted that underneath a gathered sediment of confabulation existed a firm foundation of historical truth comprising the Celtic Christian Church.⁶ Their works were intended as primers for those who sought a deeper understanding of the origins of

³ Ian Bradley, *Celtic Christianity: Making Myths and Chasing Dreams* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1999), 88-106.

⁴ For example, Georgiana Lady Chatterton, *Oswald of Deira: A Drama* (London: Longmans, Green, 1867)—essentially a romance based on the exile of Oswald, future king of Northumbria, at the court of Cynegils, the West Saxon ruler; R.B. Werborton, *The Northumbrian Abbots: A Tale of the Seventh Century* (London: Saunders, Otley, 1859)—a confusing little volume in which the story of Benedict Biscop, founder of Wearmouth and Jarrow, serves as the fictional framework for what amounts to a series of Platonic dialogues between opposing theological and philosophical viewpoints.

⁵ For example, Alfred C. Fryer, *Aidan: The Apostle of the North* (London: S.W. Partridge & Co., 1884); Alfred C. Fryer, *Cuthberht of Lindisfarne: His Life and Times* (London: S.W. Partridge & Co., 1880); Edgar S.C. Gibson, *Northumbrian Saints, or, Chapters from the Early History of the English Church* (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1884).

⁶ “It is,” Fryer noted in his writings on Cuthbert, “always a difficult matter to draw the line between fact and fiction; but even among much that is necessarily rejected as absurd or impossible, it is not hard to trace the outlines of a noble nature, worthy of being quoted as a pattern in all time and in every land.” Fryer, *Cuthberht*, 205.

Christianity in Britain; from the opposite side of the aisle, Catholic authors wrote similar treatises in support of the Rome-based mission of Augustine in 597, claiming pride of place for their preferred saints.⁷ At the turn of the twentieth century, therefore, studies of the early medieval Celtic Church were divided between those who hailed it as the seedbed of English Christianity, and those who condemned it as an obstacle standing in the path of the efforts of Augustine and his men. Very few, if any, questioned its existence altogether.

Hughes' article changed all this; it represents a very evident fork in the road of Celtic Christian scholarship. Since its publication, notes Caitlin Corning, "many new theories have been proposed and scholars have abandoned the term Celtic Church believing it to be too closely associated with inaccurate ideas."⁸ The distinction implied in Corning's words is of great significance: for the first time, a stark line has been drawn in the sand between the scholarly and the popular, creating in essence two distinct fields of study. On the popular side are those authors who continue to accept as given the reality of the Celtic Christian Church, "whose interest in the period [often] derives not from a specialist interest in history but from a personal spiritual quest."⁹ Whether or not the construct of Celtic Christianity stands up under careful scrutiny seems at times

⁷ "The name of Augustine is still, and must ever be, dear to all [Britain's] children, for it is to him that they owe the rekindling of religion's flame in their land, a flame which ever since has burnt bright and clear." C.W.H. Kendrick, *Oswald; A Tale of the Early Church. An Account of the Founding of Latin Christianity in Our Island by S. Augustine, A.D. 596* (London: J. Masters, 1875), 5.

⁸ Corning, xii.

⁹ "On the one side are Christians who see in the Celts the answer to all our spiritual desires; in parallel to this, and despite the fact that all the written remains are Christian, some others have been able to find ancient 'nature cults,' occult Gnostic wisdom, and the misty antiquity that does so much to give a whiff of intrigue to the cults of the New Age." Thomas O'Loughlin, *Journeys on the Edges: The Celtic Tradition*, Traditions of Christian Spirituality, ed. Philip Sheldrake (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2000), 159.

immaterial to those in this camp, which is one of the many sources of the frustration and condescension with which they are frequently viewed by their more academic counterparts. Theirs is a history almost by intuition, a fact made clear by George Hunter's summation of his own work in the field:

De Poar [whose *St. Patrick's World* offers a collection of translations dealing with Patrick's fifth-century mission] and Bede were indispensable because I approached this topic as a communication theorist and missiologist, with no credentials and glaring deficiencies for interpreting ancient and medieval history. My Latin and Greek are beyond rusty. I have no knowledge of Gaelic, nor any other Celtic language, nor any of the languages employed as Celtic Christians reached the "barbarian" peoples of Europe.

Some critics may charge that I have reached some conclusions on insufficient evidence. If, however, we know that all (or most) effective advocates do certain things, or that all (or most) Christian movements do certain things, or that all (or most) primal peoples respond to the gospel in certain ways, we can venture related conclusions about Celtic Christianity with less evidence than if Celtic Christian sources were our only sources of strategic Christian insight.¹⁰

Hunter's *mea culpa* reveals the distinctive focus of current popular studies of the Celts: they are undertaken, both in their Christian and New Age incarnations, in the interests not of historical, but of spiritual insight. This insight is sought, according to Donald Meek, in the face of unchecked urbanization and a growing postmodern sensibility. As urban centers in the 1980s slowly devoured the British countryside, "the 'Celtic Fringe' began to be viewed afresh as a region where life could be lived as God and nature intended"; meanwhile, the onset of postmodernism created a portrait of the Celtic Christians which "rel[ied] on a motley collection of snapshots and images of the past, which are assembled to meet the needs of the collector."¹¹ The stock in trade of this movement is the "Celtic anthology": collections of prayers, hymns, and sermons

¹⁰ George G. Hunter III, *The Celtic Way of Evangelism: How Christianity Can Reach the West...Again* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2000), 11.

¹¹ Donald E. Meek, *The Quest for Celtic Christianity* (Edinburgh: The Handsel Press, 2000), 25, 24.

composed in what has been dubbed “an alternative ‘Celtic tradition.’”¹² Alongside these are many pieces of “mainly didactic writing which seeks to teach further ‘Celtic’ lessons”; it is evident from these last, notes Meek, that “the ‘Celts’ are little more than posts to which [writers] can tether their own hobby-horses, ranging from charismatic renewal to the accomodation of secular culture and the church’s contemporary agenda, particularly along the lines of ‘the church as we think it ought to be.’”¹³ Recent popular Celtic Christian literature, then, opens in its pages a passageway back to a simpler time, both socially and spiritually, and offers the chance to undo some of the evils caused by the mechanizing trends of the twentieth century.

“Ranged against these enthusiastic revivalists,” writes Ian Bradley, “are a number of scholars who take a diametrically opposed line on the subject of Celtic Christianity.” To these academicians, as to Hughes, the concept itself is “bogus and misleading..., with no historical reality and existing only as the invention and in the imagination of outsiders [to the Celtic world].”¹⁴ Popular writers, according to these thinkers, fail to recognize both the complexity of their subject and its relative obscurity. The legends of the Celtic saints hail from an age wrapped in a “misty and vague aura,” defined less by what is known than by what may be imagined, and popular writers too often allow their imaginations to run wild. There is, notes Bradley, an “absence of hard facts [that] has

¹² See, for example, Pat Robson, ed., *A Celtic Liturgy* (London: HarperCollins Publishers, 2000); Robert Van de Weyer, ed., *Celtic Fire: The Passionate Religious Vision of Ancient Britain and Ireland* (New York: Doubleday, 1990); Avery Brooke, ed., *Celtic Prayers* (New York: The Seabury Press, 1981).

¹³ Meek, 12, 14. See, for example, Hunter; Scott A. Bessenecker, *The New Friars: The Emerging Movement Serving the World’s Poor* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, IVP Books, 2006); Edward C. Sellner, *Stories of the Celtic Soul Friends: Their Meaning for Today* (New York: Paulist Press, 2004). Caitlin Corning points out that “popular Celtic spirituality in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries tells us much more about the spiritual desires of people today than [of] those in the early medieval world.” Corning, 3.

¹⁴ Bradley, 225-6.

allowed hagiographers, romantics and propagandists for various causes to weave myths and spin legends,” a reality which in the minds of scientific historians is underappreciated in popular literature.¹⁵ The promiscuity with which necessity has mothered invention tends to force students of the period to one of two extremes, either of utter credulity or of absolute cynicism, from which they observe one another with “more than a little loathing.”¹⁶

The output of the “scholarly” wing of Celtic Christian studies runs the gamut from irreproachably academic to forthrightly polemical. On the latter end of the spectrum one finds authors like Donald Meek, who tends to lump the majority of popular authors into an insensitive mass, ignorant of Celtic ways and eager simply to turn a profit with their wares.¹⁷ Others, like Kathleen Hughes and Ian Bradley, take a softer approach; there is in their arguments no condemnation of those who venture too far afield when imagining the Celtic world, largely because these authors have themselves experienced the strong romantic pull of the Celtic Christian story.¹⁸ Many who have come to Celtic Christianity by way of its popular characterization have found it necessary subsequently to trim their sails and take another pass at an incredibly complex historical period, one that cannot be pigeonholed as easily as some popular literature suggests. Finally, there are those, such as Thomas Charles-Edwards and Caitlin Corning, who fall somewhere

¹⁵ Bradley, 2.

¹⁶ Thomas O’Loughlin, *Celtic Theology: Humanity, World and God in Early Irish Writings* (London: Continuum, 2000), 4.

¹⁷ Meek, 11-12.

¹⁸ Both Hughes and Bradley, before joining the ranks of the “scholars,” produced what may simply be called odes to Celtic Christianity—Bradley with *The Celtic Way* (1993), and Hughes with *The Church in Early Irish Society* (1966). *Ibid.*, 15-16; Bradley, 191.

toward the center of the spectrum; for these authors, the problem of Celtic Christianity is neither a negative nor a positive one, but simply a question in need of an answer.¹⁹

By now, most of those in the “scholarly” branch of Celtic Christian studies have come to regard the concept of a specifically “Celtic” church, in complete isolation from the broader medieval Church, with a good deal of caution and a great many caveats. This, however, has done little to halt the development of what may be termed the “Celtic Christian myth.” The popular contribution to Celtic Christian thought, unconcerned as it is with original languages and complicated contextualization, holds a far greater appeal for the mass of those interested in the spirituality of the Celts, and is much more accessible to the lay reader. Because of this, shout as they may, academics, with all their meticulous research, have been to a large extent drowned out by the sheer volume of their competitors’ imaginations.

The Stuff of Legend

Hailed by enthusiasts as the “perfect church,” the Christianity of the Celts was born, according to popular mythology, in the years between the withdrawal of Roman troops from Britain after Alaric’s sack of the Eternal City in 410, and the arrival of Roman missionaries, headed by Augustine, in 597.²⁰ During this time, the Church the Empire left behind “remained in uncontroversial isolation,” unaware of practical and

¹⁹ See Thomas M. Charles-Edwards, *Early Christian Ireland* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

²⁰ “During the larger portions of the fifth and practically the entire sixth century the Celtic Church was apparently cut off from Western Christianity, and developed points of view which were different from those of the broad stream of believers in Mediterranean lands.” Leslie Hardinge, *The Celtic Church in Britain* (London: SPCK, 1972; reprint, New York: TEACH Services, 2005), xii, xi.

theological innovations in the wider Christian world.²¹ Because of their precarious perch on the periphery of the world, notes Donald Meek, the faithful of the Celtic Church have been by subsequent generations readmitted to Eden. They are the imagined inhabitants of “a neglected ‘Celtic Fringe’ which was allegedly a cornucopia of ancient literature, preserved and protected by a robust resistance to external pressures,” a mystical land where “[i]solation is a virtue, not a vice, since it holds back the relentless force of progress, and allows ancient qualities to survive undisturbed.”²² Secure in its insular sequestration, the Celtic tradition flourished while the Roman declined; while the latter “had long stopped growing, the mission of the Celtic branch had rescued Western civilization and restored movemental Christianity in Europe.”²³

The Church Goes Rogue

In the immediate aftermath of Roman withdrawal, cursory attempts were made by the papacy to extend the Christian mission into Ireland. The *Annala Riogachta Eireann* (Annals of Ireland), in an entry for the year 430, describes the commissioning by Pope Celestine I of a certain Palladius, whom he sent “to propagate the faith among the Irish.” While this first missionary to the Emerald Isle did succeed, according to the annals, in planting three major churches which he populated with a multitude of relics and left in the care of four of his companions, Palladius’ mission ultimately failed; “he did not receive respect in Ireland” and set out once again for Rome, but a disease of some kind

²¹ Charles-Edwards, 405.

²² Meek, 52.

²³ Hunter, 40.

overtook him in Britain and he died en route.²⁴ This, according to propaganda both medieval and modern, meant that “the way was now open for the missionary, chosen by heaven, to step into the gap: Patrick.”²⁵

Very little is known about the historical Patrick: as Charles-Edwards notes, “not a single date can be given to any event of [his] life.”²⁶ From the two extant writings attributed to him, however, a few biographical details may be gleaned.²⁷ The son of a British deacon and grandson of a Christian priest, Patrick informed his readers that he and his countrymen “had pulled back from God; we did not keep his commandments; and we did not listen to our priests, who kept on warning us regarding ‘our salvation.’”²⁸ Because of this lapse in piety, the young Patrick was taken into captivity in Ireland during a raid, and there he lived for six years in the service of a pagan named Miliucc. While in captivity, the future missionary developed his spiritual acuity and was given “a great grace toward that people [the Irish]”; as a reward for his renewed dedication to God, he was allowed to escape from his master and return to Britain and his family.²⁹ This,

²⁴ John O’Donovan, trans. and ed., *Annala Riogachta Eireann: Annals of the Kingdom of Ireland, by the Four Masters, from the Earliest Period to the Year 1616*, 2nd ed. (Dublin: Hodges, Smith, & Co., 1856), 1:129. Much of what is known concerning Palladius’ mission derives from the writings of Prosper of Aquitaine. See Charles-Edwards, 210-11, 202-14, 234-40.

²⁵ Thomas O’Loughlin, *St. Patrick: The Man and His Works* (London: Holy Trinity Church, 1999), 16.

²⁶ Charles-Edwards, 219.

²⁷ Although details concerning Patrick’s life are scant, the historical evidence of his activity is unique among fifth-century figures in that writings in his own hand, descriptive of his missionary work in Ireland, have survived to the present. See Bradley, 11-12. Because of this, “we still know more about him than about any other fifth-century British, let alone Irish, person.” O’Loughlin, *Celtic Theology*, 25.

²⁸ Patrick, *Patrick’s Declaration of the Great Works of God*, in Oliver Davies, trans. and ed., *Celtic Spirituality*, The Classics of Western Spirituality, vol. 96, ed. Bernard McGinn (New York: Paulist Press, 1999), 67.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 70. See also Muirchú, *The Life of Patrick*, in Davies, 97.

however, was not to be his last contact with Ireland, for not long after his homecoming Patrick received his version of the Macedonian Call:

And after a few years I was again with my parents in Britain who welcomed me as a son. They, in good faith, begged me—after all those great tribulations I had been through—that I should go nowhere, nor ever leave them. And it was there, I speak the truth, that “I saw a vision of the night”: a man named Victoricus—“like one” from Ireland—coming with innumerable letters. He gave me one of them and I began to read what was in it: “The voice of the Irish.” And at that very moment as I was reading out the letter’s opening, I thought I heard the voice of those around the wood of Foclut, which is close to the western sea. It was “as if they were shouting with one voice”: “O holy boy, we beg you to come again and walk among us.” And I was “broken hearted” and could not read anything more. And at that moment I woke up.³⁰

At this point, Patrick’s autobiographical material becomes lost in a complex defense of his ministry in Ireland, for which the above story serves as legitimation. The student hereafter is forced to turn to the holy man’s biographers for enlightenment, and promptly falls into a morass of conflicting detail. It was in these works of hagiography that the Patrick legend was originally developed, largely the product of a battle for primacy in the last quarter of the seventh century between the sees of Armagh and Kildare in Ireland and Canterbury in Britain.³¹ Two efforts in particular deserve notice: the *Life of St. Patrick*, written by Muirchú in 695, and the *Collectanea* of Tírechán, most likely written a decade earlier.³² These were written in response to claims by Cogitosus in his account of St. Brigit, to the effect that her foundation of Kildare was the seat of archiepiscopal authority in Ireland; both countered this assertion with allegations of their own in favor of Armagh, the foundation most closely associated with the ministry of

³⁰ Muirchú *LP*, in Davies, 73. See also Acts 16:6-10.

³¹ Charles-Edwards, 416-40. See also Bradley, 14-16.

³² For a detailed discussion of these dates, see Charles-Edwards, 438-40.

Patrick.³³ In the *Life of St. Patrick*, Patrick is portrayed “as the heroic figure who almost singlehandedly defeats paganism in Ireland” by means of a climactic encounter with Lóegaire, king of the Uí Néill, on the plain of Tara. Tírechán also included this episode in his account, but he was more concerned with the churches founded by the saint during the years of his ministry; the *Collectanea* consists mainly of a travelogue depicting Patrick’s progress around the northern half of Ireland, visiting various religious foundations. “Such a circuit,” notes Charles-Edwards, “was an expression of lordship, ecclesiastical as much as secular.”³⁴ In either case Patrick was worthy of primatial authority, in Muirchú’s because of his role in the eradication of Irish paganism, and in Tírechán’s due to the claim he held over the various churches themselves. Between the two, these biographers-cum-politicians elevated the missionary Patrick to superhuman status, a true hero of the faith. The persistence of this role is evidenced in the *Tripartite Life*, written in the ninth century, in which Patrick is identified as “the ray and the flame and the precious stone and the brilliant lamp which lighted the west of the world..., to wit, *Sanctus Patricius Episcopus*, that is, holy Patrick, high bishop of the west of the earth and father of the baptism and belief of the men of Ireland.”³⁵

³³ Brigit’s foundation of Kildare stood in the southern territory of Leinster, and Patrick’s of Armagh in the northern territory of Ulster. See Charles-Edwards, 416, 57, 238. Cogitosus insisted that the foundation at Kildare “[had] always been ruled over by the Archbishop of the Irish and by the abbess, whom all the abbesses of the Irish venerate, by a blessed line of succession and by perpetual rites.” Cogitosus, *The Life of St. Brigit the Virgin*, in Davies, 123.

³⁴ Bradley, 13; Charles-Edwards, 10. See also Van de Weyer, 10.

³⁵ Whitley Stokes, trans. and ed., *The Tripartite Life of Patrick, with Other Documents Relating to that Saint* (London: Eyre & Spottiswoode, 1887), 7. “It seems highly doubtful,” notes Ian Bradley, “that Patrick, apparently largely forgotten in the two centuries after his death, would have become the central figure that he has in the pantheon of Celtic saints had it not been for his posthumous enlistment to promote Armagh’s claim for ecclesiastical supremacy in Ireland. The success of that campaign, and the backing that it received from the Uí Néills and others, established him as the national apostle.” Bradley, 16.

Ian Bradley refers to the battles waged in the pages of medieval hagiography as “one of the most successful and enduring pieces of brand-labelling in the history of marketing.”³⁶ Because of the haziness and confusion which permeate the story of his life, the Patrick open to scholarly scrutiny is almost entirely a theoretical personage, a fact which has allowed successive students of his life and ministry to remodel him to suit their ideological purposes.³⁷ Thus, the saint featured prominently in the religious conflicts that consumed Ireland during the second half of the nineteenth century. Mirroring the efforts of Muirchú and Tírechán before them, Catholic and Protestant authors “engaged in a lively pamphlet war,” both sides claiming for their clergy a direct descent from Ireland’s apostle and his successors.³⁸ This contest between confessions began in the sixteenth century, during the insular Reformations: in their search for legitimation, Welsh, English, Irish, and Scottish Protestants looked to the Celtic saints of the British Isles for proof that “a pure and uncorrupted faith preceded the rise of Rome,” and in them they found “the precursor of reformed Christianity.”³⁹ The Catholic Church fought back, but it was the “reformed” Celtic Church which captured the minds of the masses, both in the sixteenth and in the nineteenth century. An image of Patrick emerged which “play[ed] down his

³⁶ Bradley, 7. Several authors have noted the extent to which that marketing campaign in recent years has ceased to be figurative and has developed into an actual industry. See Meek, 5-14; O’Loughlin, *Celtic Theology*, 2; Bradley, 189; Bryan Sykes, *Saxons, Vikings, and Celts: The Genetic Roots of Britain and Ireland* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2006), 45-6.

³⁷ “However, the price of Patrick’s popularity has been that he has been smothered by his legend and cult. Each age has adopted him, adapted him to a particular agenda, and remade him in its image.” O’Loughlin, *St. Patrick*, 9. “Patrick has been so buried by hagiographers, so shamrock-laden by the cultural politics of defining Irish identity that for many he has become almost a mythical figure.” Thomas O’ Loughlin, *Celtic Theology*, 25.

³⁸ Bradley, 129.

³⁹ “This induced Protestants in Wales, Scotland, and Ireland to construct a tunnel which ran beneath the Roman Catholicism of the Middle Ages. When they arrived at the far end of the tunnel, and emerged into the bewitching moonlight of their imagined past, they found a ‘Celtic Church’ which showed remarkably Protestant features. This allowed them to claim ‘Celtic’ backing for Protestantism.” Meek, 110.

Roman connections,” and presented him instead as the forerunner of “a church that was national, independent of Rome and Protestant in all but name 900 years before the era of Calvin and Luther.”⁴⁰

This is the Patrick inherited by current proponents of popular Celtic Christian thought. He is celebrated as a free agent evangelizer who, deputized by no one other than God himself, of his own volition journeyed into a foreign land and, unassisted, converted an entire nation.⁴¹ Unlike Palladius’ mission, Patrick’s was undertaken completely independently of the hierarchical structure of Rome, and was untouched by its worldly complacency; “Patrick,” exults one recent author, “gave himself to people about whom the institutional church of the fifth century seemed unconcerned.”⁴² Leslie Hardinge described him as an early champion of *sola scriptura*, unmindful in his theology of accumulated church tradition: “[t]here is nothing in Patrick’s works,” he wrote, “which indicates his acceptance of the teachings of church fathers or the canons of councils. He appealed solely to the Scriptures in support of what he believed, practised, and propagated.”⁴³ In the face of a fossilized Roman institution, Patrick stood in defense of the under-represented barbarian. Based upon “a handful of ancient sources,” George Hunter imagines an indigenous mission characterized by “open-air singing, [and]

⁴⁰ Bradley, 130, 79.

⁴¹ Hunter, 26.

⁴² Bessenecker, 101.

⁴³ Hardinge, 29-30. This is quite a bold statement, based as it is upon a *curriculum vitae* consisting of two extremely brief writings.

probably employing parable, story, poetry, song, visual symbols, visual arts and, perhaps, drama to engage the Celtic people's remarkable imaginations."⁴⁴

While he does not go so far as to separate Patrick completely from his Romano-British context, Hunter does present him as making the first move away from a strictly Roman approach to mission, establishing principles which his successors "adopted...and extended."⁴⁵ Thomas Cahill echoes this assessment: "Patrick's gift to the Irish," he exclaims, "was his Christianity—the first de-Romanized Christianity in human history, a Christianity without the sociopolitical baggage of the Greco-Roman world, a Christianity that completely inculturated itself into the Irish scene."⁴⁶ Using as a springboard the medieval inventions of Muirchú and Tírechán, subsequent generations have molded Patrick the Briton into Patrick the adoptive Irishman; the first missionary since the New Testament wanderings of St. Paul, yet greater than Paul in his venturesomeness; a more insightful and original theologian than Augustine of Hippo himself; the man responsible for leaving the strictures of Roman religion behind and taking the first few steps down the unique path which, in time, would blossom into medieval Celtic Christianity.⁴⁷

⁴⁴ Two of the major sources upon which Hunter bases this hypothesis are the works of Muirchú and Tírechán, discussed above. The others are the works of Patrick—the *Declaration*, cited above, and his *Letter to the Soldiers of Coroticus*. Hunter, 21, 123-4n21.

⁴⁵ Although "Patrick emphasized...the planting of traditional parish churches, each with a priest, with groups of churches administered by a bishop, which followed the established Roman way of 'doing church,'" his "leadership [also] had 'indigenized' Christianity to Irish cultural soil more than anyone else was attempting anywhere." Ibid., 27. See also Van de Weyer, 10-11.

⁴⁶ Thomas Cahill, *How the Irish Saved Civilization: The Untold Story of Ireland's Heroic Role from the Fall of Rome to the Rise of Medieval Europe*, 1st ed., The Hinges of History, vol. 1 (New York: Doubleday, 1995), 148.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 112-13, 107-8, 115, 133.

The Church Goes Native

Patrick's identity, however, makes up only half of the popular Celtic Christian equation; equally significant is the identity of those to whom he ministered—the Celtic peoples of Ireland. It was in the celebrated imagination and the heightened sensibilities of this race that the Celtic Christian faith, in the opinion of many, attained the full measure of its idiosyncratic beauty. The sixth century—the century between Patrick and Aidan—has been identified by Celtic enthusiasts as the cultural incubator in which the Celtic Church was born, the “predestined hour at which, passing from simplicity to reflection, [the Celts were able to] bring forth to the light of day, for the first time, all the treasures of their nature.”⁴⁸

Not all of the attention garnered by the Celts has been of a positive nature. Like many other “aboriginal” cultures in the world, they have well served the proponents of racial purity theories—generally by occupying the short end of the stick.⁴⁹ The image, however, which has dominated modern conceptions of the Celtic people is that of an unspoiled, pastoral folk, immune to the importunities of “modern civilization, destructive as it is of local variations and national types.”⁵⁰ This image, stemming from the romantic notions of the Victorian era, was created essentially out of whole cloth by a French

⁴⁸ Ernest Renan, “The Poetry of the Celtic Races,” in William G. Hutchison, trans. and ed., *The Poetry of the Celtic Races, and Other Essays by Ernest Renan*, The Scott Library 100 (London: The Walter Scott Publishing Co., n.d.), 39.

⁴⁹ See Sykes, 40-3, 59-63.

⁵⁰ Renan, 5. This is a sentiment which, in the present age of globalization, still finds a sympathetic reception among those afraid of a total loss of personal and national identity; “[i]t is for this reason,” suggests Donald Meek, “that romantic ‘Celtic’ package tours beckon the many weary travellers who feel that somewhere, somehow they will find the missing part of their identity.” Meek, 30. The role of St. Patrick as the patron saint of the Irish, both at home and abroad, is evidence of this enduring theme. “As the saint of the nation he stood for an independent country with a glorious past of gold and learning and saints. Pressed into this mould, the emphasis on St. Patrick’s Day in the latter part of the nineteenth century was an important feature in the development of an awareness of an Irish ‘nation’ as a culturally distinct entity.” O’Loughlin, *St. Patrick*, 10.

philologist, Ernest Renan, and his English comrade, literary critic Matthew Arnold, in defense of a culture they perceived as having been made the brunt of unwarranted prejudice.⁵¹ “I would not for the world,” protested Arnold in the 1880s, “have the lineaments of the Celtic genius lost.”⁵²

Taking as their starting point the blueprint for Celtic characterization supplied by the works of “Ossian,” which presented the landscape of the Scottish Highlands “in terms of mist and mystical gloom,” Renan and Arnold painted a rejuvenated portrait of the Celts.⁵³ While colored in softer tones, this new likeness was not much different from the wild theorizings of their racialist opponents. In an attempt to excuse Celtic vices by exalting the Celtic soul, the colleagues papered over the strong warrior race celebrated by “Ossian” with a weak image of gadabout poets, unable to focus on matters of significance because of their overwhelming sense of lyricality:

The essential element in the Celt’s poetic life is the *adventure*—that is to say, the pursuit of the unknown, an endless quest after an object ever flying from desire....This race desires the infinite, it thirsts for it, and pursues it at all costs, beyond the tomb, beyond hell itself. The characteristic failing of the Breton [Celtic] peoples, the tendency to drunkenness—a failing which, according to the traditions of the sixth century, was the cause of their disasters—is due to this invincible need of illusion. Do not say that it is an appetite for gross enjoyment; never has there been a people more sober and more alien to all sensuality. No, the Bretons sought in mead what Owen, St. Brandan, and Peredur sought in their own way,—the vision of the invisible world.⁵⁴

⁵¹ See Meek, 44-50; Bradley, 120-2; Sykes, 41, 60-1.

⁵² Matthew Arnold, *On the Study of Celtic Literature and On Translating Homer* (New York: Macmillan & Co., 1883), 11.

⁵³ “Ossian,” a purported bard of the Highland Gaels, was introduced to the world in 1761 by James Macpherson, who claimed him as the author of two newly discovered epic poems, *Fingal* and *Temora*. While these “works” have acted as a foundation for much of the scholarly examination of the Celtic races carried out since their publication, and also provided the basis for the formal discipline of Celtic studies, it has been critically demonstrated that, although Macpherson “did use genuine Gaelic material, particularly Gaelic heroic ballads, as the basis of his ‘translations,’ ...he made creative use of these texts, and encased their narratives in a framework which was largely of his own making.” Meek, 38-9, 38-43.

⁵⁴ Renan, 9 (author’s emphasis). See also Bradley, 107.

Not only did the Celts' painfully poetic natures account for their penchant for alcoholism, it also explained their apparent inability to occupy center stage in political affairs: "[i]t is easily discernible," commented the Frenchman, "how little fitted were natures so strongly concentrated to furnish one of those brilliant developments which imposes the momentary ascendancy of a people on the world"—a sad truth which had relegated the Celtic races to the perpetual position of political second string.⁵⁵

The name, however, which the Celts were unable to make for themselves in the political arena, has been claimed brilliantly for them in ecclesiastical matters, and this again is due largely to the work of their French apologist, Renan.⁵⁶ These intoxicated poets possessed "an adorable delicacy in [their] religious instincts," and these instincts "predestined them to Christianity" because of "the gentleness of manners and the exquisite sensibility of the Celtic races."⁵⁷ The Englishman Arnold described the "sensibility of the Celt" as "a beautiful and admirable force..., one of the very prime constituents of genius, perhaps its most positive constituent; it is to the soul what good senses are to the body, the grand natural condition of successful [artistic] activity."⁵⁸

⁵⁵ "Destitute of the means of expansion, alien to all idea of aggression and conquest, little desirous of making its thought prevail outside itself, [the Celtic race] has only known how to retire so far as space has permitted, and then, at bay in its last place of retreat, to make an invincible resistance to its enemies." Renan, 6. "This colossal, impetuous, adventurous wanderer, the Titan of the early world, who in primitive times fills so large a place on earth's scene, dwindles and dwindles as history goes on, and at last is shrunk to what we now see him. For ages and ages the world has been constantly slipping, ever more and more, out of the Celt's grasp. 'They went forth to the war,' Ossian says most truly, '*but they always fell.*'" Arnold, 80-1 (author's emphasis).

⁵⁶ Renan (1823-92) has been named the "Father of Celtic Christianity." Meek, 48.

⁵⁷ Renan, 45.

⁵⁸ The Celtic temperament's "essence is to aspire ardently after life, light, and emotion, to be expansive, adventurous, and gay." Arnold, 81, 76.

Between the two, an image was presented to the world of a race of beings uniquely qualified on a genetic level both to receive and to transmit the Christian gospel.

At the turn of the twentieth century, this thought was given further impetus through a process dubbed, by Donald Meek, “[t]he ‘Carminising’ of the Celtic tradition.”⁵⁹ In 1900, a Scottish exciseman by the name of Alexander Carmichael published his masterwork, the *Carmina Gadelica*, six volumes of Gaelic charms, poems, and prayers that would become the lens through which the Celts and their religion would be glimpsed by the masses—as Meek styles it, “the ‘bible’ of Celtophiles.”⁶⁰ Carmichael’s own observations in the introduction to the original edition of the *Carmina* reinforced the extrapolations of Renan and Arnold, and lent still greater authority to a beautiful character sketch with little or no probative basis. “Religion,” he soliloquized, “pagan or Christian, or both combined, permeated everything—blending and shading into one another like the iridescent colours of the rainbow.” These were a people so deeply steeped in the substance of spirituality that it was impossible to determine “where the secular began and the religious ended—an admirable union of elements in life for those who have lived it so truly and intensely as the Celtic races everywhere have done.”⁶¹ In his efforts to preserve the folklore of a people, the exciseman from Lismore took “the pagan Highlander of Scotland...from the barbarian backside of the wilderness” and gave

⁵⁹ Meek, 71, 71-3.

⁶⁰ As of the publication of the 1992 Floris Books edition of the *Carmina*, which “dispenses with the Gaelic texts entirely,” the material gleaned from Gaelic peasants has been lifted cleanly out of its proper context and has become instead “part and parcel of an English cultural environment.” Meek, 72, 62. Bradley notes that the *Carmina* “has probably done more than anything else to colour modern perceptions of Celtic Christianity and enhance its popular appeal.” Bradley, 157. See, for example, Hunter, 32-5.

⁶¹ Alexander Carmichael, introduction to the original edition of the *Carmina Gadelica*, in C.J. Moore, ed., *Carmina Gadelica: Hymns and Incantations* (Edinburgh: Floris Books, 2006), 30.

him “a central place in the modern, multi-cultural visitor-friendly theme-park of so-called ‘Celtic spirituality.’”⁶²

Although the materials compiled in Carmichael’s *Carmina* hail not from Ireland, or Wales, or northern England, but exclusively from the Scottish Highlands and islands, they have been accepted as the definitive template by which a comprehensive portrait of Celtic culture—and, by extension, of Celtic Christianity—may be constructed.

“Carmichael’s reinterpretation of the Highland Gael as a quintessentially spiritual being created an image of great power,” notes Donald Meek, “which, in turn, helped to transform the perceptions of other regions which we now call ‘Celtic.’”⁶³ Thus, not only the Gaels of Scotland, but also their Briton neighbors to the south and Irish neighbors to the west, both in the immediate present and in the distant past, are viewed as participating, and having participated, in “certain ‘Celtic’ ways of seeing the world which transcended time and place.”⁶⁴ As a Christian people, they insistently are described as sharing with God a connection beyond that enjoyed by other people (or beyond that which other people are capable of enjoying). Many claim to have recognized in them a special appreciation of the immanence of God—“his omnipresence in the universe”—an awareness springing from their very nature; “[t]he Celts’ sense of God’s presence and power was so great because they saw God in everything, worshipped him through

⁶² Meek, 61.

⁶³ Ibid. This dynamic allows Robert Van de Weyer, working backward from the *Carmina*, to christen the Irish Church “the jewel of Celtic Christianity.” Van de Weyer, 11.

⁶⁴ The commonly held acceptance of the authoritative nature of Carmichael’s work among proponents of popular Celtic Christianity “tends to suggest that they view the ‘Celtic Fringe’ as a region in which time stands still.” Meek, 72.

everything, and turned to him for aid and guidance in everything they did.”⁶⁵ Half, then, of Patrick’s greatness, insofar as popular Celtic Christian thought is concerned, lies not in his aptitude for theological exposition, or in his methods as a missionary, or even in the plethora of churches he is supposed to have founded, but in the simple fact that he took a faith left behind by the Roman Empire and transported it to a people preprogrammed to receive it, and who were infinitely more qualified, culturally and even genetically, to care for it than their Roman predecessors had been.

The Church Goes Home

According to the popular Celtic Christian myth, Patrick, a Briton, at the beginning of the fifth century took his Christian faith across the Irish Sea, and in doing so set in motion a process of development which would lead over time to the flowering of a full-fledged and idiosyncratic Celtic Christian Church. Less than a century and a half later, in 563, a monk-priest named Columba completed the circle, leaving Ireland for Britain and returning Celtic Christianity to its native roots.⁶⁶ At some point between 563 and 574, with the cooperation of Conall mac Comgaill, king of the Dal Riata Irish, Columba founded his famed monastery on the island of Iona and set about the conversion of the northern Picts.⁶⁷ The foundation of Iona is of the utmost importance to the development of the popular Celtic Christian myth, for two reasons. On one hand, it represents the

⁶⁵ Brooke, 12. Brooke’s, like so many other anthologies of “Celtic” prayers and poetry, is composed entirely of material gleaned from Carmichael’s *Carmina*.

⁶⁶ If the theory is correct that Patrick hailed originally from the vicinity of Dumbarton on the Clyde, then the return of Celtic Christianity to its native roots in 563, with Columba’s foundation of Iona, is almost geographically literal. See Whitley Stokes, introduction to *Tripartite Life*, cxxxvii.

⁶⁷ For the chronology of Iona, see Richard Sharpe, trans., introduction to Adomnán of Iona, *Life of St. Columba* (London: Penguin Books, 1995), 16-19. His missionary work among the Picts is “[t]he role in which St. Columba seems particularly a Scottish saint.” Sharpe, 30.

culmination of that process: Columba is presented as the product and conveyor of a fully crystallized Celtic Christian tradition, defined by its peculiarly missionary monasticism.⁶⁸ On the other hand, and perhaps more importantly, as the monastic home of Aidan, Columba's foundation of Iona opened the door to the legendary clash in Britain between the Celts and the Romans, and represents thus the first step down the road which led, ultimately, to the Synod of Whitby.

As Iona's founder lay dying in 597, the south of Britain prepared to welcome another evangelistic mission, this one at the behest of Rome and led by the other Augustine. Commissioned by Gregory the Great in 596, Augustine's missionary band arrived in Britain the following year and, after securing the permission of Ethelbert of Kent to preach among his subjects, quickly came into conflict with their British predecessors. Already the celebration of Easter was an issue of debate: at a conference held at Augustine's Oak in 603, the Roman representative "began by urging [the British clergy] to establish brotherly relations with him in Catholic unity," addressing in part the adherence of the British bishops to the Celtic-84 Easter table, rather than the Victorian which was currently in use elsewhere in Europe.⁶⁹ Requesting a second meeting, on the

⁶⁸ "In the monastic system of Ireland and Celtic Scotland, as elsewhere, the continuous round of Divine worship, the cultivation of the spirit of devotion, the study of Divine truth, the practice of self-discipline, were all duly cared for; but with these were conjoined on the part of the Celtic monks a missionary zeal so earnest and an ardour of diffusive Christian love so glowing, that the lives of their recluses and anchorites are seldom thought of, and our minds naturally dwell on the active and untiring missionary labours which have achieved such great things for the evangelisation of our own land." John Dowden, *The Celtic Church in Scotland: Being an Introduction to the History of the Christian Church in Scotland down to the Death of Saint Margaret* (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1894), 83-4.

⁶⁹ Bede, *Ecclesiastical History of the English People* 1.23, 25, II.2, in Leo Sherley-Price, R.E. Latham, and D.H. Farmer, trans. and ed., *Ecclesiastical History of the English People with Bede's Letter to Egbert and Cuthbert's Letter on the Death of Bede*, rev. ed. (London: Penguin Books, 1990), 72-3, 74-6, 104. See also Corning, 73.

grounds that they could not adopt serious changes without consulting their own people, the British clergy sought advice from a holy hermit:

Those summoned to this [second] council first visited a wise and prudent hermit, and enquired of him whether they should abandon their own traditions at Augustine's demand. He answered: "If he is a man of God, follow him." "But how can we be sure of this?" they asked. "Our Lord says, *Take My yoke upon you and learn of Me, for I am meek and lowly in heart,*" he replied. "Therefore if Augustine is meek and lowly in heart, it shows that he bears the yoke of Christ himself, and offers it to you. But if he is haughty and unbending, then he is not of God, and we should not listen to him." Then they asked, "But how can we know even this?" "Arrange that he and his followers arrive first at the place appointed for the conference," answered the hermit. "If he rises courteously as you approach, rest assured that he is the servant of Christ and do as he asks. But if he ignores you and does not rise, then, since you are in the majority, do not comply with his demands."⁷⁰

Having decided to follow the holy man's suggestion, the British bishops were greeted by a seated Augustine; "[s]eeing this, they became angry, accusing him of pride and taking pains to contradict all that he said."⁷¹ Because of this perceived slight, they refused to acquiesce to any of the Roman's demands, and the two groups parted on extremely harsh terms.

This is an interesting episode, the implications of which are quite complex. Because of their refusal to adopt Augustine's Easter—which to Bede equalled a rejection of Christian unity—and because of their concomitant unwillingness to join him in his efforts to convert the Anglo-Saxons, Bede seems to consign the British Christians to a secondary and negative role within his narrative, a role which they continue to occupy up to and beyond the end of the *Ecclesiastical History*.⁷² However, while Bede's intention

⁷⁰ Bede *EH* II.2, in Sherley-Price, Latham, and Farmer, 105-6 (author's emphasis).

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 106.

⁷² "Once the British ecclesiastical leaders rejected Augustine's call to unity in Church practices and a joint mission to convert the Anglo-Saxons, Bede's depiction of this tradition is entirely negative. The British Church is only mentioned in passing from this point in the *History* always with the reminder that it

may have been to condemn the British for their refusal to uphold unity within the Church, his honesty has allowed the episode's consumers to arrive at an entirely different conclusion. The key element of this story to the present-day observer, points out Ian Bradley, is not the hard-heartedness of the British, but the apparent arrogance of Augustine. In his efforts to paint the British clergy in negative tones, Bede unwittingly created an image of Roman arrogance which still affects the student of Celtic Christianity today. "One might add," notes Bradley, "that it is [Bede] who is also largely responsible for giving the other 'Roman' side to early British Christianity its negative image." Augustine's behavior at this second meeting "became a touchstone of Roman imperialism and reinforced the image of Celtic Christians as a gentle people crushed by the might of their haughty big brothers."⁷³ This episode became a rallying cry among Protestant rhetoricians in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries: it was the scene of "[t]he fatal contamination" of a pure, primitive church at the hands of a power-hungry Rome.⁷⁴

Not long after Augustine's death in 604, his successors dispatched a priest named Paulinus into the northern regions of Britain, where he was welcomed into the Northumbrian court of Edwin by Edwin's wife Ethelberga, the Christian daughter of Ethelbert of Kent. At first, Paulinus' efforts met with reasonable success: Edwin, along with his household, was converted and in return granted the city of York to Paulinus as his episcopal seat. However, only six years after his baptism, Edwin was killed in battle

used heretical practices." Corning, 72. See also D.H. Farmer, notes to *Ecclesiastical History*, in Sherley-Price, Latham, and Farmer, 366.

⁷³ Bradley, 27-8.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 93, 94.

and Paulinus, along with Edwin's widow and children, fled south to Kent.⁷⁵ As with the "failed" mission of Palladius in Ireland, which cleared Patrick's path to apostleship, Paulinus' retreat vacated the Northumbrian stage in order to make room for Aidan, the principal actor in Bede's account of the true conversion of the Northumbrian people. Also as in the case of Palladius and Patrick, Aidan's mission, originating from Iona rather than the "Roman" Canterbury, has facilitated a perception of religious competition in seventh-century Britain. Setting out from Iona in 635, wrote Alfred Fryer in 1884, "Aidan never thought of asking for any sanction from Rome or Canterbury."⁷⁶ Many authors have made much of Oswald's decision to look to the Irish rather than to the English Church for a bishop for his people; while in all likelihood the king's choice reflected the relationship he had nurtured with Iona during several years of exile in Dal Riata, some see his actions as an indication that, upon assuming the Northumbrian throne, Oswald "disregarded whatever remnants of Kentish Roman Christianity might still have remained" in his kingdom, and opted instead for the purer faith of the Celts.⁷⁷

From the very beginning, the popular myth maintains, the mission of Aidan was destined to achieve greater success than its southern counterpart; as opposed to the "Italian monks" of Augustine's retinue, who were "men of foreign speech and manners," the members of Aidan's cohort were "men of more Britannic feelings," which assured a greater affinity between these men and their potential converts. While the Kentish mission tended to ignore the subjects and target the kings, Aidan and his Celtic monks

⁷⁵ Bede *EH* II.9, 14, 20, in Sherley-Price, Latham, and Farmer, 117, 131-2, 140-1.

⁷⁶ Fryer, *Aidan*, 27.

⁷⁷ "When the initial success of Augustine and his followers failed to fulfill its promise, it was the group of missionaries from Iona...that gave the faith a precarious foothold up into Scotland and down into England." Hardinge, 9-10.

“went to work with true missionary earnestness to convert the half Celtic people of Northumbria, man by man, in their own homes.”⁷⁸ The image of the sanctity and humility of the Celtic missionaries presented by Fryer and others is heightened when coupled with Bede’s description of Northumbria’s first Ionan bishop:

Among other evidences of holy life, he gave his clergy an inspiring example of self-discipline and continence, and the highest recommendation of his teaching to all was that he and his followers lived as they taught. He never sought or cared for any worldly possessions, and loved to give away to the poor who chanced to meet him whatever he received from kings or wealthy folk. Whether in town or country, he always travelled on foot unless compelled by necessity to ride; and whatever people he met on his walks, whether high or low, he stopped and spoke to them. If they were heathen, he urged them to be baptized; and if they were Christians, he strengthened their faith, and inspired them by word and deed to live a good life and to be generous to others.⁷⁹

The comparison between the Northumbrian and Kentish missionary efforts drawn from this passage is self-evident: humble Aidan, avoiding all signs of worldly status by walking rather than riding, and willing to address all manner of people, couth or uncouth, is set up against the picture of arrogance captured in Bede’s snapshot of the conference at Augustine’s Oak, epitomized by Augustine’s refusal even to rise and greet his equals.

These are the two forces, according to the popular myth, which came into violent conflict at the Synod of Whitby in 664. The simplicity and purity of the Aidanic mission (as embodied in its self-effacing namesake) fell prey at Whitby to the bureaucratic, tradition-encrusted, imperialistic Church of Rome (represented by the unbending Augustine), and was crushed by a weight of “apparently superficial” doctrinal and practical nonsense.⁸⁰ Romantic notions of the Synod of Whitby as a heroic last stand

⁷⁸ Fryer, *Aidan*, 109.

⁷⁹ Bede *EH* III.5, in Sherley-Price, Latham, and Farmer, 150.

⁸⁰ Hunter, 40.

against the hardening of the faith receive further emphasis from Bede's veiled hints at the development of a fattened, lethargic Northumbrian Church in the years after 664.⁸¹ All of this has worked together over the years to solidify one thought, and to plant it firmly in the minds of those who embrace the popular myth. Celtic Christianity came home only to be crucified.

A Myth in Action

The Celtic Christian myth has developed steadily over the centuries, for a multitude of reasons. The continual cycle of renewed interest in all things Celtic is a phenomenon which Ian Bradley has dubbed "Celtic Christian revivalism," and of which he has identified six major historical instances:

The first took place as long ago as the eighth and ninth centuries when hagiographers first created idealized portraits of the Celtic saints and Bede compared the purity of the golden age of Aidan and Cuthbert with the corruption of his own day. The second significant revival took place in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, stimulated partly by the new Anglo-Norman rulers of the British Isles and partly by the outburst of romantic imagination that produced the Arthurian legends and the Quest for the Holy Grail. The Reformation brought a new interest in and appropriation of the Celtic Church as a prototype of sturdy independent British Protestantism. During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries antiquarianism, growing national consciousness, denominational rivalries and the influence of the romantic movement combined to give further shape and appeal to the entity that was now coming to be known as Celtic Christianity. The early part of the twentieth century saw a fifth distinct period of revival, in part growing out of the Celtic Twilight movement and focusing on Iona as a place of exceptional spiritual power, ecumenical potential and renewal of the church. The closing decades of the twentieth century have witnessed a sixth revival which so far shows no signs of waning.⁸²

This most recent and ongoing revival is characterized by a sort of supraconfessional appeal: a semantic shift, from talk of "Celtic Christianity" to the broader, more inclusive

⁸¹ Aidan's life was, declared Bede, "in marked contrast to the apathy of our own times." Bede *EH* III.5, in Sherley-Price, Latham, and Farmer, 150.

⁸² Bradley, viii.

language of “Celtic spirituality” is evidence of an attraction that crosses ecumenical borders, and even at times bridges the gap between religion and secularity.⁸³

Especially since the inception of Bradley’s latest period of Celtic Christian revival, scholars have been fulminating against what they understand as an invasion of the academy by an army of rank amateurs.⁸⁴ The builders of the Celtic Christian myth, however, have proven remarkably resilient in the face of academic attack. The Archbishop of Canterbury insisted that “a glance at the Irish penitentials should disabuse anyone of the notion that Celtic Christians were instinctively hostile to legalism,” and others argue loudly for an insular church as council-ridden and bureaucratic as any other medieval branch of Christianity.⁸⁵ Meanwhile, promoters of the popular Celtic myth continue to espouse notions of “a Christian understanding which [was] basic and universal;...something which many people today are looking for but tragically are finding that that search is carrying them outside the structures of the institutional Church.”⁸⁶

It is in this struggle with a cold and lifeless institutional church that popular Celtic Christianity finds its true identity, and it is this identity which lends strength to its stand

⁸³ “The accomodation between neo-paganism and ‘Celtic Christianity’...is made possible by laying stress on the ‘Celtic’ components of the new mixture and by equating what remains of ‘Christianity’ with ‘spirituality,’ a term wide enough to embrace any form of belief or ‘spiritual’ system.” Meek, 26-7, 28. See also O’Loughlin, *Celtic Theology*, 2; Corning, 2-3.

⁸⁴ Donald Meek is one of these scholars; he frequently derides writers who “are not at all familiar with what is normally classed (by scholarly analysis) as Celtic on the basis of language or culture” and who “are not usually conversant with any of the Celtic languages, and bring to their interpretation a whole range of external presuppositions based on the context in which they themselves are located, usually English-based metropolitan culture.” Meek, 7.

⁸⁵ Rowan Williams, *Why Study the Past?: The Quest for the Historical Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2005), 103. “A committee-free Arcadia may be very appealing to burnt-out clerics in present-day national churches,” comments Donald Meek, “but it is unlikely to have existed in the Celtic west.” Meek, 87.

⁸⁶ Esther de Waal, *A World Made Whole: Rediscovering the Celtic Tradition* (London: Fount, 1991), quoted in Meek, 74.

against the onslaught of academic inquiry. Ultimately, the church of the Celts, as seen through the eyes of postmodern Christians, stands as the champion of all opposed, revolutionary church movements.⁸⁷ In the perceived conflict between the Celtic and Roman traditions in the sixth and seventh centuries, the beleaguered faithful of the twenty-first century find their own experiences reflected in those of their medieval brethren.⁸⁸ This sense of kinship becomes the basis for a foundational analogy: the early medieval church of the Celts is to the Roman Church as the emerging postmodern church is to the church already in existence. Upon the groundwork of this parallelism, an oppositional theology is built which colors every aspect of popular Celtic Christian thought.⁸⁹

The “perfect” church of the medieval Celts, however, was not only a church in opposition; it was even more crucially a church overwhelmed. A theme of perseverance in the face of impossible odds runs throughout the popular perception of the Celtic race, beginning once again with the work of Ernest Renan, who in the 1800s, describing the messianic Arthurian cult of Wales and Cornwall, wrote:

It is thus that little peoples dowered with imagination revenge themselves on their conquerors. Feeling themselves to be strong inwardly and weak outwardly, they protest, they exult; and such a strife unloosing their might, renders them capable

⁸⁷ See Meek, 24.

⁸⁸ “Perhaps our own experience of being on the edge makes us respond to these earlier peripheral peoples in a way that we cannot with those who belonged to a church that was at the center of things.” O’Loughlin, *Journeys on the Edges*, 157.

⁸⁹ This oppositional framework is not only a postmodern phenomenon. In the aftermath of the Henrician Reformation, the Celts were co-opted by English Protestant apologists seeking some historical legitimation for their actions. They saw in their medieval forebears a church that “had originally been independent and free of Roman influence. The fatal contamination had occurred in 597 when Augustine had been sent by Pope Gregory the Great with authority over the existing British bishops to establish a new hierarchy based in Canterbury.” Bradley, 93.

of miracles. Nearly all great appeals to the supernatural are due to peoples hoping against all hope.⁹⁰

What the fugitive Celts of Wales experienced in the fifth century at the hands of the invading Anglo-Saxons has since that time come to apply also to popular perceptions of sixth and seventh-century Celtic Christians in the face of an encroaching Roman Church. For as long as it could, writes Robert Van de Weyer, “[t]he Celtic Church had steadfastly rejected the authority of Rome, asserting that each individual is answerable directly to God for his actions.”⁹¹ An irrecoverable chasm between Rome and the Isles is a standard feature in popular conceptions of the medieval Celtic Church: “[t]here seems to be no reasonable doubt but that the cleavage between Roman and Celtic Christians was very wide, and could not be bridged without one party’s giving way to the other.”⁹² This situation came to a head at the Synod of Whitby in 664, an encounter which would forever enshrine the Celtic Christian Church as the church of the underdog.

Donald Meek sees much of contemporary popular thought on Celtic spirituality as being characterized by “symbolic thinking.” People who devote themselves to consideration of things Celtic tend to “think visually, seeing beautiful stone crosses in ‘Celtic’ locations...; splendidly executed manuscripts...; remote islands, far from the noise of modern living...; [and] special individuals called saints...with the aura of colorful stained glass, radiating light to a darkened room.”⁹³ In this scheme, the ecclesiastical gathering at Whitby, “that great set-piece confrontation between ‘Celtic’ and ‘Roman’

⁹⁰ Renan, 10.

⁹¹ Van de Weyer, 17.

⁹² Hardinge, 23.

⁹³ “People not only ‘see’ Celtic things; they feel them: peace and tranquillity in distant islands and ‘peripheral’ rural areas; purity of environment; and indefinable loveliness in wind and sea and sky; dazzling sunrises and soothing sunsets.” Meek, 9, 9-13.

Christianity,” becomes the ultimate symbol. Its depiction by historians “has done so much to shape a romantic view of Celtic Christianity as a gentle, anarchic, deeply spiritual movement crushed by the authoritarian weight of Roman bureaucracy and imperialism.”⁹⁴ Symbol has eclipsed substance, and as a symbol Whitby has afforded longevity to a momentary movement; there, at the site of their purported demise, the Celts and their Christianity achieved eternal life.

⁹⁴ Bradley, 24-5.

CHAPTER TWO

The Roots of Controversy

Opinions vary widely as to the significance of the events which transpired at Whitby in 664. For some, the outcome was the greatest of imaginable evils, entailing the loss of “a form of individual Christianity which...was truly linked to the perennial philosophy of humanity” to the overwhelming force of “Roman domination.”¹ Others praise Oswy’s decision in favor of Rome as the best of all possible results, ensuring that “the English Church should *not* be cast in an Irish mould, and thereby cut off from order, culture, and civilisation.”² Still others seem indifferent, noting only the inevitability of the whole affair.³ All of these divergent interpretations, however, betray a common understanding of the Synod of Whitby: at its most basic level, the meeting in 664 was about control.⁴

All of these claims reveal a singularly contextual reading of the episode in question. From an Enlightenment or a postmodern perspective, the issues confronted at Whitby do seem almost painfully trivial; to such an observer, perhaps more concerned

¹ Shirley Toulson, *The Celtic Alternative: The Christianity We Lost* (London: Century, 1987), 9, 7.

² “The Continental Church influence, with its uniformity and its superior culture, drew these Irish foundations into its sphere.” William Bright, *The Roman See in the Early Church and Other Studies in Church History* (London: Longmans, Green & Co., 1896), 391, 396 (author’s emphasis).

³ Leslie Hardinge, *The Celtic Church in Britain* (London: SPCK, 1972; reprint, New York: TEACH Services, 2005), 23.

⁴ “Apart from the social awkwardness involved, it might seem to us a fairly trivial dispute; but it was only a symptom of a much more basic argument, about church government and, ultimately, power: which church would dominate the other?” Magnus Magnusson, *Lindisfarne: The Cradle Island* (Stocksfield, UK: Oriel Press, 1984), 61. See also George G. Hunter III, *The Celtic Way of Evangelism: How Christianity Can Reach the West...Again* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2000), 41.

with experience than with doctrinal niceties, they may appear downright meaningless. However, a reductionist approach to the Easter debate—dismissing the theological particulars because they no longer resonate—fails to acknowledge the importance of those particulars to the medieval Christian theologian; so also does the attempt to redefine rather than to understand the issues involved.⁵ “The real issues, of course,” writes George Hunter, “ran deeper than hairstyle, a date for Easter, and norms for community life”⁶—such an attitude insists that these concerns must have been secondary and superficial, that they cannot have had any true significance to the parties present in 664. Nothing, remarks Caitlin Corning, could be further from the truth: “[i]t is important to understand that the [medieval] Church believed it was critical that all Christians celebrate Easter on the same day,” because on this mere matter of chronology rested the whole of Christian belief.⁷

Acting as a buttress for the argument from religious domination is the belief that, in reality, the Synod of Whitby was a cleverly orchestrated Roman ploy. However, upon closer examination, the role played by Rome in the Northumbrian synod becomes a matter of debate. If, indeed, the gathering was the result of Roman subterfuge, why were there no representatives present at the meeting either from Rome or from its satellite, Canterbury? Why does Bede seem to suggest that the entire proceeding was the result, not of premeditated papal planning, but of happenstance and chance encounters? In the end, the careful student is forced to question the standard presentation (even in scholarly

⁵ This tendency is evident in George Hunter’s treatment of the synod. See Hunter, 40-1.

⁶ Ibid., 40.

⁷ Caitlin Corning, *The Celtic and Roman Traditions: Conflict and Consensus in the Early Medieval Church* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 13.

works) of Wilfrid as the defender of a truly “Roman” cause, and even the primacy of the religious motivations behind the convocation of the synod. Politics too were an important consideration, and the king’s concerns at Whitby involved much more than the orthodox celebration of Easter.

The search for a greater understanding of the Synod of Whitby calls the student to look past the symbolic weight of the event itself. It requires a careful examination both of its context and of its content. Out of this effort emerges a picture which appreciates the spirituality of the Celts without discounting their intellectual acumen. From its iconic perch, the popular view of the synod in 664 tends to ignore the fact that the supporters of the Celtic-84 Easter brought to the bargaining table a wealth of theological and exegetical subtlety, and were more than a match for their Dionysian counterparts. Far from being unconcerned with doctrinal minutiae, the Celtic Christians were masters of it. Also, the emblematic nature of the encounter—pitting “Roman” against “Celt”—exalts the religious aspects of the episode to the point that all others are hidden from view. There is a strong undercurrent of political maneuvering at the Synod of Whitby; it was, however, a matter not of papal prerogative but of royal advantage.

Setting the Stage

The Backdrop

On April 12, 627—Easter Sunday—Edwin of Northumbria, “with all the nobility of his kingdom and a large number of humbler folk,” were baptized by Bishop Paulinus at York, in a church of timbers specially constructed by the king for that purpose, and the

future cathedral city became Paulinus' see.⁸ Among Edwin's fellow converts, one is of special note: a young girl of thirteen, by the name of Hild, also entered the baptismal waters that day. Bede describes her as "nobly born, the daughter of Hereric, nephew to King Edwin"; as the great-niece of a king, Hild's career well illustrates the close ties between church and throne in seventh and eighth-century Northumbria.⁹ At age thirty-three, she abandoned the secular for the religious life and set her sights on the monastery at Chelles, near Paris, where her sister Hereswith had embraced conventual life.

However, before she could depart Britain for Gaul, Hild received a call from Aidan of Lindisfarne, who offered her instead a small bit of land adjacent to the River Wear, where she established her first religious community along with "a handful of companions." After a year in this place, Hild was relocated to the monastery at Heruteu (Hartlepool, southeast of Durham); she served as abbess of this community "for some years, constantly occupied in establishing the regular life."¹⁰

Meanwhile, the balance of Northumbrian power had undergone violent and repeated reorganization. Edwin, Hild's great-uncle and fellow initiate, had been defeated and killed in 633 at the battle of Hatfield Chase, the victim of an alliance between Cadwallon, ruler of the Welsh kingdom of Gwynedd, and Penda, future king of the Mercians. In the immediate aftermath of Edwin's defeat, Cadwallon emerged briefly as the scourge of the Northumbrian provinces; for one terrible year—a year "that remains

⁸ Bede, *Ecclesiastical History of the English People* II.14, in Leo Sherley-Price, R.E. Latham, and D.H. Farmer, trans. and ed., *Ecclesiastical History of the English People with Bede's Letter to Egbert and Cuthbert's Letter on the Death of Bede*, rev. ed. (London: Penguin Books, 1990), 131.

⁹ Bede *EH* IV.23, in Sherley-Price, Latham, and Farmer, 243. See also Bertram Colgrave, trans. and ed., introduction to *The Earliest Life of Gregory the Great by an Anonymous Monk of Whitby* (Lawrence, KS: University of Kansas Press, 1968; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 31.

¹⁰ Bede *EH* IV.23, in Sherley-Price, Latham, and Farmer, 243-4.

hateful to all good men”—the Welsh king ruled his conquered subjects “not as a victorious king but as a savage tyrant.”¹¹ He, however, came shortly to his own end at the hands of Oswald at the battle of Heavenfield in 634; it is instead his former ally, the pagan Penda of Mercia, who stands in history as the bane of the Northumbrian royal house. Only eight short years after Oswald’s return from Dal Riata, at Maserfelth, fighting “against the same heathen Mercians and their heathen king, who had also slain his predecessor Edwin,” the saintly king of Bede’s *Ecclesiastical History* fell, at the age of only thirty-eight.¹² For the next decade, Oswald’s brother Oswy, who succeeded his sibling first to the northern Bernician throne and later to the reunified kingdom of Northumbria, was harried mercilessly by his Mercian neighbor, a conflict not ameliorated by the fact that, after 653, the two rivals were in-laws and half of the pagan Penda’s domain had been Christianized due to the influence of his son and sub-king, Peada.¹³

At the height of this conflict, in 655, the Northumbrian king prepared for one final encounter with his pagan foe. The monk of Jarrow pictured a devout Oswy, on his knees before the Lord, seeking help in the face of an intractable enemy who had already refused his humble petitions for peace. His act of homage to Penda having been rejected out of hand, the Northumbrian opted to submit instead to God; in return for victory in battle, he

¹¹ The period between Edwin’s death and Oswald’s return, Bede wrote, was so devoid of redeeming value that “all those calculating the reigns of kings have agreed to expunge the memory of these apostate kings.” Thus, the year of Cadwallon was erased from the historical record and was assigned instead to Oswald, Bede’s saint-king, an operation which has hopelessly confused the chronology of the latter king’s reign. Bede *EH* II.20, III.1, in Sherley-Price, Latham, and Farmer, 140-4.

¹² Bede *EH* III.9, in Sherley-Price, Latham, and Farmer, 157.

¹³ Around 653, Penda’s son Peada wed Oswy’s daughter Alchfled following an earlier union between Oswy’s son Alhfrith and Cyniburg, a daughter of Penda’s house. Peada accepted Christian baptism as part of the marriage pact, and the kingdom of the Middle Angles was converted as a result. Bede *EH* III.21, in Sherley-Price, Latham, and Farmer, 177. See also Thomas Charles-Edwards, *Early Christian Ireland* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 316.

offered to God the virginity of his daughter Aelfled and twelve landed monasteries. “This done,” wrote Bede, “he gave battle with an insignificant force to the pagan armies,” outnumbered thirty to one, on the banks of the River Winwaed. In the course of the battle, the Mercian king was slain and his forces thrown into total disarray.¹⁴ Bede attributed this triumph to divine intervention in a struggle between good and evil—the Christian warriors of Northumbria against a “barbarous and godless enemy”—and it is clear that Oswy did as well, for he immediately set about the fulfillment of his vow. Aelfled, his infant daughter, was given into the care of the Abbess Hild at Heruteu, as the king had promised; he also, in keeping with his word, gave twelve small grants of land for the establishment of religious communities where, remarked Bede, “heavenly warfare was to take the place of earthly.” Two years after the battle of Winwaed, Hild left Heruteu for one of Oswy’s twelve grants located at a place called Streaneshalch, now known as Whitby, where she founded a new monastery.¹⁵ Here she would remain until her death in 680.

Of Hild’s years at Whitby, which Bertram Colgrave identified as possibly the most renowned of the seventh-century double monasteries, Bede wrote:

She established the same regular life as in her former monastery [at Hartlepool], and taught the observance of righteousness, mercy, purity, and other virtues, but especially of peace and charity. After the example of the primitive Church, no one there was rich, no one was needy, for everything was held in common, and

¹⁴ Bede *EH* III.24, in Sherley-Price, Latham, and Farmer, 183-4.

¹⁵ Bede does not say specifically in the *Historia* that the land upon which Whitby was founded came from the king; he simply states that Hild “acquired a property of ten hides at a place called Streaneshalch.” *Ibid.* However, the size of the property, which coincides with the size of each property donated by Oswy, the fact that by the time Hild acquired this land, the king’s daughter had been under her protection for two years, and the fact that Hild was Oswy’s second cousin—Oswy’s mother, Acha, was Edwin’s sister—lend some credence to the suggestion. See Colgrave, *Life of Gregory*, 34. D.H. Farmer points out that the foundation at Streaneshalch was to become the burial place for the Northumbrian royals. Farmer, notes, in Sherley-Price, Latham, and Farmer, 370.

nothing was considered to be anyone's personal property. So great was her prudence that not only ordinary folk, but kings and princes used to come and ask her advice in their difficulties and take it. Those under her direction were required to make a thorough study of the Scriptures and occupy themselves in good works, to such good effect that many were found fitted for Holy Orders and the service of God's altar.¹⁶

Five men from Hild's community, Bede informed his readers, were deemed worthy of the episcopacy—Bosa, Aetla, Oftfor, John, and Wilfrid—and two of these at least, Oftfor and John, went on to continue their studies under Theodore of Tarsus, Archbishop of Canterbury. The former of the two even managed a pilgrimage to Rome, "which in those days was considered an act of great merit."¹⁷ Furthermore, in the year of the abbess' death, a servant of the Whitby community, sleeping in a stable, burst into song at the behest of angels; encouraged by the abbess, the poet Caedmon left the secular life and dedicated himself to the composition of heavenly music.¹⁸ "[T]he chief glory of Whitby," remarked Edgar Gibson, "is not the memory of its Ecclesiastical Council, not of

¹⁶ Bede *EH* IV.23, in Sherley-Price, Latham, and Farmer, 244. This is not, as some imagine, a Celtic innovation pointing to the liberality of their views on the role of women in the church; rather, it was a tradition originating on the continent in the Merovingian kingdoms. See Colgrave, *Life of Gregory*, 38, 34.

¹⁷ Bede *EH* IV.23, V.3, in Sherley-Price, Latham, and Farmer, 244-5, 269-70. Colgrave suggested that the journey from Whitby to Canterbury may have been standard procedure for Whitby-trained monks. Colgrave, *Life of Gregory*, 37. Three of the men mentioned by Bede—Bosa, John, and Wilfrid II—are recorded upon entering their sees in the Peterborough MS of the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle (Oxford, Bodleian Library MS Laud 636): Bosa was appointed to the Deiran see in 678, John to the see of Hexham in 685, and then at a later date was transferred to the see of York, and Wilfrid II, who had formerly served John as priest, succeeded him in that see. Intriguingly, both Bosa and John were involved in the division of the more famous Wilfrid's see, the act which set off the cycle of exile, appeal to Rome, and return to grace which defined his later career. Bosa, according to the Peterborough MS, was sent in Wilfrid's place to occupy the Deiran half of the latter's former Northumbrian see, and John, who was in Hexham upon Wilfrid's ultimate return in 706, was transferred to York in order to provide Wilfrid with a see of his own. Michael Swanton, trans. and ed., *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* (New York: Routledge, 1998), 38-9, 39n17.

¹⁸ Bede *EH* III.24, in Sherley-Price, Latham, and Farmer, 248-51.

its five bishops, not even of its first abbess, but of the father of English song—the first of a glorious line of English poets.”¹⁹

All things considered, it is hardly surprising that Whitby was selected as the venue for the Easter synod in 664.²⁰ Its abbess’ blood relation to Oswy, who convened the synod; the fact that his daughter Aelfled had by that year been under Hild’s tutelage for almost a decade; the likelihood of its estate having been donated to the church by the king himself after the decisive battle of the Winwaed; and the community’s prominence on the Northumbrian religious landscape—all of these conditions point to that monastery as a logical choice. Bertram Colgrave indicated one final circumstance that may have qualified Whitby above other foundations of Oswy’s kingdom to be the setting for the synod: unlike some of its sister communities, that at Whitby appears to have had strong ties both to its Celtic and continental backgrounds. The former may be explained by the role played by Aidan of Lindisfarne in Hild’s career; it had been he who had convinced her to remain in Britain rather than entering Balthild’s Frankish foundation at Chelles, and who had contributed the land by the Wear upon which she had established her first community. The latter connection, which according to Colgrave, may be seen in the dedication of the Whitby church to St. Peter, would have been due to the influence of Oswy’s queen, Eanfled.²¹

¹⁹ Gibson, 49. “[I]t is for this incident that seventh-century Whitby is chiefly remembered.” Colgrave, *Life of Gregory*, 38.

²⁰ Colgrave, *Life of Gregory*, 35.

²¹ “It was not without significance that the church at Whitby was dedicated to St. Peter—a sign of the growing influence of the Roman party.” *Ibid.*, 36. See also Bede *EH* III.24, in Sherley-Price, Latham, and Farmer, 184.

The Players

After Edwin's death at Hatfield Chase in 633, his widow Ethelberga, in the company of Bishop Paulinus of York, fled with the late king's heirs south to Kent, fearing the return of Oswald, from whose father Edwin had wrested the Northumbrian throne in 625. Also wary of her brother Eadbald, who had inherited the Kentish throne from their father Ethelbert, Ethelberga sent Edwin's son and grandson, Wuscfrea and Yffi, to the court of Dagobert in the Frankish kingdoms, where they both died in infancy; Edwin's daughter, Eanfled, remained with her mother in Britain.²² At the Kentish court, the princess was raised by her Christian mother according to Roman religious practice; twenty years later, when Oswy sent the priest Utta to Kent to bring Eanfled back to Northumbria to become his queen, she brought with her a Kentish cleric named Romanus as confessor and guide. According to Bede, Romanus continued in his new home to observe the customs of the old, following the Dionysian Easter along with the queen and her court; the king, on the other hand, having been converted to Christianity by the Irish of Dal Riata, celebrated the holy day according to their method of calculation. A liturgical confusion ensued which appears to have been one of the driving forces behind the calling of the Synod of Whitby in 664: "[i]t is said," related the monk of Jarrow, "that the confusion in those days was such that Easter was sometimes kept twice in one year, so that when the King had ended Lent and was keeping Easter, the queen and her attendants were still fasting and keeping Palm Sunday."²³

²² Bede *EH* II.20, in Sherley-Price, Latham, and Farmer, 141.

²³ Bede *EH* III.15, 25, in Sherley-Price, Latham, and Farmer, 167, 186. Bede's concern over Easter being celebrated twice in one year is significant: at the Council of Nicaea, the Christians' first attempt to address the issue of Easter, the Church had ruled, first of all, that the holy day could not be celebrated on the Jewish Passover, but also that "Christians should not rely on the Jewish calculations for Passover since they sometimes allowed this feast to be observed twice in the same year." Corning, 11-12.

Oswy sent for Eanfled in 651. That same year Aidan of Lindisfarne died, carried away by an illness while visiting one of the king's royal residences; he was succeeded by an Irishman named Finan, and this was when tempers truly began to flare. Even in Aidan's time there had been some disagreement in Northumbria as to the appropriate method of Easter dating: after Paulinus decamped to Kent in the wake of Edwin's demise, wrote Edgar Gibson, one small voice of Christian piety remained in an otherwise apostate world, that of James the Deacon. His role "is not often mentioned in the history of the times, but he appears before us now and again, always the same patient humble worker, going on in his own quiet path of duty, and using his sweet voice to the glory of God."²⁴ James, Bede wrote, was still keeping "the true and Catholic Easter" when Aidan arrived at Oswald's court in 635; by this time, also, controversy over divergent Easter calculations, touched off by the arrival of Columbanus from Ireland, had been percolating on the Continent for two decades. As early as 604-5, English bishops had been in contact with their colleagues in Ireland concerning this dilemma, and the papacy threw its opinion into the mix a few years before Aidan's arrival in Northumbria, by means of a letter sent by Pope Honorius to the Irish Church, "whom he learned to be in error about the observance of Easter."²⁵ There is, moreover, some evidence of a major Irish synod

²⁴ James, for Gibson, provided the link between the missions of Paulinus and Aidan: when Aidan had been established as bishop of Northumbria, he wrote, James' work of preserving the faith was finished. "[H]e could sing his 'Nunc Dimittis' before he died, and in him passed away the last of that band of missionaries who first preached the Word of Life in English Yorkshire." Gibson, 18-19. See also Bede *EH* II.16, 20, in Sherley-Price, Latham, and Farmer, 134, 141-2.

²⁵ "He earnestly warned them not to imagine that their little community, isolated at the uttermost ends of the earth, had a wisdom exceeding that of all churches ancient and modern throughout the world, and he urged them not to keep a different Easter, contrary to Paschal calculations and the synodical decrees of all the bishops of the world." His missive was followed by "authoritative and learned letters to correct this error" from John IV, Honorius' successor but one. Bede *EH* III.25, II.19, in Sherley-Price, Latham, and Farmer, 186, 138-9. See also Corning, 19-44, 81-4, 89-93.

held at Mag nAilbe between 630 and 636 to negotiate an Easter settlement.²⁶ However, in the midst of all this discussion and debate, of which the Northumbrian leadership must have been aware, Aidan's episcopacy seems to have avoided any violent outbreaks of theological sentiment. Bede credited this to that bishop's holy demeanor, "for it was realized that, although he was in loyalty bound to retain the customs of those who sent him, he nevertheless laboured diligently to cultivate the faith, piety, and love that marks out God's saints."²⁷

With the accession of Finan to the bishopric of Lindisfarne, all this changed; he was, wrote Bede, "a hot-tempered man whom reproof made more obstinate and openly hostile to the truth."²⁸ The implications of Bede's account of the Easter situation in Aidan's time are that Lindisfarne's first bishop was willing to let sleeping dogs lie; his successor, on the other hand, appears to have been determined to wake them. During Finan's episcopacy, the argumentative spirit which had for several years hovered on the periphery of Northumbrian awareness was brought to the forefront of that church's affairs. The monk of Jarrow depicted the bishop of Lindisfarne locked in rhetorical battle with his nemesis, an Irishman named Ronan, concerning the question of Easter; the latter apparently had met with a degree of success, convincing many of his listeners of errors in the Celtic-84 Easter table, "or at least persuad[ing] them to make more careful enquiry

²⁶ The discussion at this synod took rather quaint form. Three possible tests were proposed: 1) a copy of each Easter table could be thrown on a fire, the one which did not ignite being the correct one, 2) each party could choose one representative to be placed in a burning building, the proof being the same, or 3) a holy monk might be summoned from the dead and asked his opinion on the matter. *Ibid.*, 88-9.

²⁷ Bede *EH* III.25, in Sherley-Price, Latham, and Farmer, 186-7.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 186.

into the truth.”²⁹ This confrontational estate was inherited by Colman, the man who succeeded Finan to the see of Lindisfarne, and the situation continued to spiral downward at a steady pace.³⁰ Colman, of whom little is known outside the context of the Easter controversy, stood as the champion of the Celtic-84 Easter at the Synod of Whitby in 664; however, the *primo uomo* of the Synod of Whitby was a monk named Wilfrid, newly returned from several years on the Continent and in Rome.

Born in 634, Wilfrid at a young age entered the monastic life: “[w]hen he was fourteen,” wrote Eddius Stephanus, his biographer, “he decided to leave his father’s estates to seek the Kingdom of Heaven, for his stepmother was harsh and cruel.”³¹ The lad presented himself accordingly to Eanfled, the queen, who sent him to the Lindisfarne community as the servant of a nobleman named Cudda. Having excelled in that house as a student of spiritual affairs, the young man set his sights on the southern horizon; with the queen’s blessing, Wilfrid began the first of his many pilgrimages to Rome, “a road,” noted Stephanus, “hitherto untravelled by our people.” Delayed for a time in the Kentish kingdom, where the young monk was first exposed to the differences between Celtic and Roman usages, and again in Lyons at the court of Archbishop Annemundus, Wilfrid eventually arrived in the Holy See and discovered a whole new world of brilliance and

²⁹ Bede’s treatment of Finan is complex: the bishop is neither completely innocent nor fully at fault. Even as Bede deplores his errors on the subject of Easter and seems to criticize him for his hot temper, he also recognizes in his episcopacy a simplicity of life that is sorely lacking in the lives of many post-Whitby clerics. He still showed enough true monastic spirit to build on the island of Lindisfarne a church “not of stone, but of hewn oak, thatched with reeds after the Irish manner.” This is contrasted with a later bishop, Eadbert, who “removed the thatch, and covered both roof and walls with sheets of lead.” *Ibid.*, 186. See also Bradley, 29.

³⁰ During Colman’s episcopacy, wrote Bede, “[t]his dispute rightly began to trouble the minds and consciences of many people, who feared that they might have received the name of Christians in vain.” Bede *EH* III.25, in Sherley-Price, Latham, and Farmer, 187.

³¹ Eddius Stephanus, *Life of Bishop Wilfrid* 1, 2, in J.F. Webb and D.H. Farmer, trans. and ed., *The Age of Bede*, rev. ed. (London: Penguin Books, 1998), 109.

tradition. During Wilfrid's sojourn in Rome, the archdeacon Boniface, among other lessons, "taught him the rule about Easter, of which the British and Irish schismatics were ignorant." After several months of this training, the young man set off on his return journey, "armed with the holy relics he had collected in Rome."³²

Wilfrid reappeared in Northumbria in the early 660s and quickly found a kindred spirit in Alhfrith, son and sub-king of Oswy of Northumbria. The two bonded, according to Stephanus, particularly on the subject of Easter; Alhfrith was, apparently, his mother's son as well as his father's, being devoted to the spiritual traditions of Canterbury and Rome.³³ Between the chronological confusion at court and the intemperate tendencies of the kingdom's most recent prelates, this partnership was formed in a highly charged atmosphere. Upon its formation, the mood grew even more electric: Wilfrid was determined to correct the grievous ways of the Irish and British Christians, and he had now for an ally a reigning member of the Northumbrian royal house.³⁴

Because of the friendship between Alhfrith and his priest, what had begun as a theologian's squabble developed in Northumbria into a family affair. Oswy and Alhfrith found themselves on opposite sides of the debate: the father, "having been instructed and baptized by the Irish and having a complete grasp of their language," favored the Celtic-84 Easter, while the son, "who had been instructed in the Faith by Wilfrid," advocated the Dionysian. Moreover, relations within the Northumbrian ruling house were not

³² To this point, many churchmen had travelled north from Rome to Britain, but by all accounts, Wilfrid is at least one of the first to make the journey in the opposite direction. Even Columbanus, who made it as far as his foundation at Bobbio, never visited the Holy See. Eddius Stephanus *LW* 3-5, in Webb and Farmer, 110-12, 113n1. See also Corning, 22, 24.

³³ Eddius Stephanus *LW* 7, in Webb and Farmer, 114.

³⁴ Charles-Edwards, 318-19.

necessarily on the best of terms; Bede mentioned almost in passing that Alhfrith had at one point rebelled against his father, a fact which adds to the proceedings at Whitby a hint of hostility which has little to do with matters of religion.³⁵ Faced with this simultaneous challenge to his political and religious legitimacy, remarks Charles-Edwards, “Oswiu was reacting reasonably in attempting to resolve the issue by a royal council attended by Alhfrith but presided over by Oswiu himself.”³⁶

The catalyst which triggered the meeting at Whitby was, according to Bede, a visit to Oswy’s court by Agilbert, a bishop from the continent who had at one time occupied the West Saxon see, along with a priest named Agatho. Having gathered together representatives of both persuasions, Oswy called an assembly to decide once and for all the question of Easter observance in Northumbria:

Both kings, father and son, came to this synod, and so did Bishop Colman with his Irish clergy, and Bishop Agilbert with the priests Agatho and Wilfrid. James and Romanus supported the latter, while Abbess Hilda and her community, together with the venerable bishop Cedd, supported the Irish. Cedd, who as already mentioned had long ago been ordained by the Irish, acted as a most careful interpreter for both parties at the council.³⁷

Colman, the bishop of Lindisfarne, stood for the Celtic-84; Agilbert, due to his weak grasp of the English language, proposed Wilfrid as the defender of the Dionysian position. The stage was set for the synod to begin; however, in order properly to understand the subject matter with which it dealt, it is necessary to stop momentarily and look back, before moving forward.

³⁵ Bede *EH* III.25, 14, in Sherley-Price, Latham, and Farmer, 187, 165. “Alhfrith’s support of the Roman practices as the correct and orthodox tradition, therefore, had political implications. His actions would have been a challenge to his father; at the very least calling into question the orthodoxy of the king.” Corning, 122. See also Charles-Edwards, 319.

³⁶ Charles-Edwards, 319.

³⁷ Bede *EH* III.25, in Sherley-Price, Latham, and Farmer, 187-8.

The Easter Controversy

A Theological Tour

By the latter half of the seventh century, the correct observance of Easter had become one of the most enduring, difficult, and divisive questions in Christendom. As early as the Council of Nicaea in 325, long before the rise of Roman influence, the leaders of the Church had fathomed the importance of reaching some resolution on this matter; even Constantine, ever the amateur theologian, weighed in on the issue in a letter written to the churches of the Empire, summarizing the conciliar proceedings:

At this meeting the question concerning the most holy day of Easter was discussed, and it was resolved by the united judgment of all present, that this feast ought to be kept by all and in every place on one and the same day. For what can be more becoming or honorable to us than that this feast from which we date our hopes of immortality, should be observed unfailingly by all alike, according to one ascertained order and arrangement?...For our Saviour has left us one feast in commemoration of the day of our deliverance, I mean the day of his most holy passion; and he has willed that his Catholic Church should be one, the members of which, however scattered in many and diverse places, are yet cherished by one pervading spirit, that is, by the will of God. And let your Holinesses' sagacity reflect how grievous and scandalous it is that on the self-same days some should be engaged in fasting, others in festive enjoyment; and again, that after the days of Easter some should be present at banquets and amusements, while others are fulfilling the appointed fasts. It is, then, plainly the will of Divine Providence (as I suppose you all clearly see), that this usage should receive fitting correction, and be reduced to one uniform rule.³⁸

Unity, then, was one of the focal points of the early Church's concern with the celebration of Easter. Equally at stake, however, was the identity itself of the new religion; in the same letter, the emperor wrote: "Let us then have nothing in common with

³⁸ Eusebius, *Life of Constantine* III.18, in Philip Schaff and Henry Wace, eds., *Eusebius: Church History, Life of Constantine the Great, and Oration in Praise of Constantine*, Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers 2:1 (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1994), 524-5.

the detestable Jewish crowd; for we have received from our Saviour a different way.”³⁹

It became important, therefore, not only that Easter be celebrated in unison, but that it be celebrated by all always on Sunday, the Christian Sabbath, a practice which “entailed a separation of the Christian Easter from the Jewish Passover.”⁴⁰

Unfortunately, the deliberations at Nicaea left many specifics on the table, among them an official method for calculating the exact date of the Easter celebration. This oversight became the main source of the conflict which ultimately found expression in the Synod of Whitby; by the mid-sixth century, three opposing Easter tables were already in popular use in Western Europe—the Victorian, the Dionysian, and what is known as the Celtic-84. The first of these was commissioned by Pope Hilarius in 457 and was composed by the scholar Victorius of Aquitaine for use specifically in Rome; the second was developed in the eastern half of the Empire in 525 by Dionysius Exiguus, utilizing principles which originated in Alexandria. The third—the Celtic-84—came to the continent with Columbanus, a monk of the Irish community of Bangor; “[i]t has ‘Celtic’ in the title,” notes Caitlin Corning, “not because historians assume that a Celt composed it, but because by the time the controversy surrounding this table occurred, it was primarily used in Celtic-speaking areas.”⁴¹

³⁹ “[I]t appeared an unworthy thing that in the celebration of this most holy feast we should follow the practice of the Jews, who have impiously defiled their hands with enormous sin, and are, therefore, deservedly afflicted with blindness of soul.” Eusebius *LCon* III.18, in Schaff and Wace, 524. See also Hardinge, 92-3; Corning, 11-12; Charles-Edwards, 399-400, 411.

⁴⁰ Charles-Edwards, 399.

⁴¹ The origins of the Celtic-84, or Insular, table are uncertain, although Daniel McCarthy concludes that it may have been composed in Gaul in the late fourth or early fifth century, by Sulpicius Severus, possibly in honor of the conversion of St. Martin of Tours. Daniel McCarthy, “The Origin of the *Latercus* Paschal Cycle of the Insular Celtic Churches,” *Cambrian Medieval Celtic Studies* 28 (winter 1994): 25-49.

At the heart of the conflict between Easter tables lay another question which had been left unanswered at Nicaea. In order correctly to calculate the date of Easter, one must first accurately determine the date of the vernal equinox.⁴² Ceolfrith, the abbot of Bede's community at Wearmouth-Jarrow, wrote to Nechtan, king of the Picts, in 710:

There are three rules in holy scripture that determine the time of keeping Easter, and which no human authority may change. Two of these are decreed by God in the Law of Moses, and the third is added in the Gospel as a consequence of the Passion and Resurrection of our Lord. For the Law directed that the Passover should be kept in the first [lunar] month of the year, and in the third week of that month, that is between the fifteenth and twenty-first days of the [lunar] month. To this, the apostolic ordinance in the Gospels adds that we are to wait for the Lord's Day in this third week and begin to observe Eastertide on that day. Whoever keeps this three-fold rule correctly will never make a mistake in fixing the Feast of Easter.⁴³

Moreover, explained the abbot, while the correct calculation of the age of the moon was of the utmost importance to the true observance of Easter, it had also become a bone of contention among opposing factions in the Church, who were "sometimes mistaken not only in defining and calculating the age of the moon, but even in discovering the first month." This difficulty easily might be surmounted through careful attention to the vernal equinox, which marked the end of one lunar year and the beginning of the next. The moon at its full—on the fourteenth or fifteenth day of its cycle—before the equinox, Ceolfrith remarked, belonged to the last lunar month of the waning year "and is therefore not eligible for the observance of the Easter Festival." By the same token, "the full moon falling either on or after the equinox itself certainly belongs to the first month; on it the

⁴² Corning, 5; Charles-Edwards, 407.

⁴³ Ceolfrith drafted this letter in response to a request from Nechtan who, according to Bede, having been "convinced after assiduous study of Church writings, renounced the error hitherto maintained by his nation about the observance of Easter" and wrote to the abbot for advice as to how to proceed with this change "more smoothly and with greater authority." Bede *EH* V.21, in Sherley-Price, Latham, and Farmer, 310, 308.

ancients used to keep the Passover, and on it, when the Lord's day comes, we should keep Easter."⁴⁴

Ceolfrith's advice to pay close attention was, however, more easily offered than followed: the Nicene Council had not definitely established a date for the equinox, and by the time Nechtan received his letter from Wearmouth-Jarrow differing opinions had solidified into outright antagonism. Originally, the Church had dated the equinox to March 25, and from this date, the day "when light and darkness were in balance," they established the rest of the Christian calendar. The equinox marked the annunciation of the Archangel Gabriel, which was followed nine months later by the birth of the Christ Child on December 25; "[p]lacing Easter in relation to March 25 would complete the cycle." While this system was symbolically useful, problems with the Julian calendar, which "supplie[d] a shade too many leap years," slowly were rendering it astronomically meaningless; as the centuries progressed, the equinox came ever earlier in the year, falling by the beginning of the seventh century as early as March 17.⁴⁵ As this process wore on, the argument concerning the true equinox became one of symbol versus science: when in the third century Alexandria, in an attempt to mirror in theology what it observed in the heavens, recalculated the date of the equinox as March 21—with Rome following suit one hundred years later—"some maintained that the ecclesiastical equinox should continue to be observed on March 25 since this was the date recognized by the early Church."⁴⁶

⁴⁴ Bede *EH* V.21, in Sherley-Price, Latham, and Farmer, 314.

⁴⁵ Alfred W. Crosby, *The Measure of Reality: Quantification and Western Society, 1250-1600* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 31.

⁴⁶ Corning, 5. See also Charles-Edwards, 392-3; McCarthy, 28.

Writing to the Pictish king, Ceolfrith identified March 21 as the true equinox; this was the date chosen by the Dionysian Easter table, based as it was upon Alexandrian calculations. The Celtic-84, in contrast, chose to preserve the tradition of the early Church, continuing to set aside March 25 as the date of the equinox. These two became the major contestants in the later Easter Controversy; Charles-Edwards notes in Victorius' table a certain ambiguity concerning the equinoctial calculation, which caused many to dismiss his work as insufficient.⁴⁷ By the time Wilfrid and Colman clashed at the Synod of Whitby, the Victorian table was no longer part of the equation; the Roman see had abandoned in the 640s the table it had itself commissioned, and had chosen instead to follow Dionysius' system. Rome's decision to adopt the Dionysian table further exacerbated an already heated discussion, since in effect it demanded yet another dramatic change of the Irish Church, which had just made the momentous decision (at the Synod of Mag nAilbe) to abandon the Celtic-84 calculations in favor of the Victorian.⁴⁸

There was also disagreement between the Dionysian and Celtic factions as to the precise meaning of the Nicene injunction against Christians who celebrated Easter ““with the Jews”” on Passover.”⁴⁹ This ruling was intended primarily as a condemnation of Quartodecimanism, the practice of ““celebrat[ing] Easter on the fourteenth day [*quarta*

⁴⁷ “[Victorius’] capacity to sit unhelpfully on the fence appears to have been one reason why those who followed either the Celtic or the Roman paschal reckonings found his treatment unacceptable.” Charles-Edwards, 392-3. See also Table 1.1, Corning, 8; Bede *EH* V.21, in Sherley-Price, Latham, and Farmer, 314.

⁴⁸ There were problems other than equinoctial ambiguity with the Victorian Easter table. Due to mathematical difficulties, it at times listed two separate dates for Easter in a given year, the “Latin” and the “Greek.” Because of the confusion that arose over which of these dates should be followed, complicated by the fact that miscalculations caused the “Greek” date to differ from that observed in any part of Europe, the table commissioned by Hilarius for use in Rome quickly became more of a hindrance than a help. See Corning, 91, 7-8.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 11.

decima luna] of Nisan, irrespective of whether or not that day was a Sunday”—a practice, in other words, which continued to identify the new faith with the old.⁵⁰ Not all, however, interpreted the Quartodeciman label in the same way: some believed the Nicene ruling precluded under any circumstances the celebration of Easter on the fourteenth day of the moon, while others understood it to apply only if the fourteenth day fell on a day other than Sunday. Clerics of the latter view derived their support from the practice of the Apostle John, who “was well known to have celebrated Passover with the Jews, on the fourteenth day of the lunar month”,⁵¹ from Colman’s testimony at Whitby and from the Celtic-84’s paschal limits of *luna* 14-20, it is evident that the proponents of that table fell into this category.⁵²

Because of their willingness to celebrate Easter on *luna* 14 if it happened to fall on a Sunday, the supporters of the Celtic-84 table frequently found themselves tarred with the Quartodeciman brush. Bede went to great lengths to defend the early Irish Church against this charge, claiming that Aidan, though he often celebrated the paschal feast on the fourteenth day of the moon, did not do so “whatever the day was, as the Jews do, but on the Lord’s day falling between the fourteenth and twentieth days of the moon.”⁵³ Nevertheless, the label stuck fast. It forms a central core of Eddius Stephanus’

⁵⁰ Webb and Farmer, 120n1. See also Corning, 83; Charles-Edwards, 399-400. The Quartodeciman heresy as discussed at Nicaea stems from the practice of John of Patmos, the paschal chronology of whose Gospel is said to be the basis of this divergent Easter observance. See Alistair Stewart-Sykes, *The Lamb’s High Feast: Melito, Peri Pascha and the Quartodeciman Paschal Liturgy at Sardis*, Texts and Studies of Early Christian Life and Language 42, ed. J. den Boeft, R. van den Broek, W.L. Petersen, D.T. Runia, and J.C.M. van Winden (Leiden: Brill, 1998), 11-29.

⁵¹ Charles-Edwards, 400, 400n25, 401n27-28.

⁵² See Bede *EH* III.25, in Sherley-Price, Latham, and Farmer, 188; Table 1.1, Corning, 8.

⁵³ The monk of Jarrow was willing, in the case of Aidan and others of the early Irish churchmen, to allow for true devotion in spite of their mistaken Easter observance. He could not, he observed, commend Aidan for his errors concerning the true date of Easter, “[b]ut this in him I do approve, that in

argument in the *Life of Wilfrid*, and its persistence is also evident in several passages of a penitential written by Theodore, Archbishop of Canterbury, in the years immediately following the Synod of Whitby. He declared in this document that anyone who “flouts the Council of Nicaea and keeps Easter with the Jews on the fourteenth of the moon” must be driven from the Church. If, however, one who “does not know the difference between the Catholic faith and that of the Quartodecimans...afterward understands and performs penance,” he may after a period of one year be readmitted to the communion.⁵⁴ The supposed ties between Quartodecimanism and the Celtic Easter, a connection first made by Pope Honorius in the late 620s and perpetuated in a subsequent letter from John IV, shifted the tenor of the controversy, from an honest difference of opinion to a contest between truth and heresy.⁵⁵

Caught up in this contest was the issue of the tonsure worn by Celtic monks, which the Dionysian party referred to as that of Simon Magus, the heretical archrival of

keeping his Easter he believed, worshipped, and taught exactly what we do, namely the redemption of the human race through the Passion, Resurrection, and Ascension into heaven of the Man Jesus Christ, the Mediator between God and man.” Bede *EH* III.17, in Sherley-Price, Latham, and Farmer, 170-71.

⁵⁴ The Quartodeciman question in Britain bears some resemblance to the Donatist Controversy of the third and fourth centuries: the archbishop also prescribed that “[t]hose who have been ordained by Irish or British bishops who are not Catholic with respect to Easter and the tonsure are not united to the Church, but...shall be confirmed again by a Catholic bishop with imposition of hands.” Theodore of Tarsus, *The Penitential of Theodore*, in John T. McNeill and Helena M. Gamer, trans. and ed., *Medieval Handbooks of Penance: A Translation of the Principal Libri Poenitentiales and Selections from Related Documents*, Records of Western Civilization (New York: Columbia University Press, 1938; reprint, 1990), 188-9, 206.

⁵⁵ In an entry headed *Anno Mundi* 4951 (roughly, 640), in the Sixth Age, Bede noted that “Pope Honorius, in an epistle, refuted the quartodeciman [*sic*] error respecting the observance of Easter, which had at that time sprung up among the Scots [Irish].” Bede, *A Chronicle of the Six Ages of the World*, in J.A. Giles, trans., *The Historical Works of Venerable Bede*, vol. 2 (London: James Bohn, 1845), 286. See also Bede *EH* II.19, in Sherley-Price, Latham, and Farmer, 138-9, which places Honorius’ letter in the latter days of Edwin’s reign (632-3). Corning dates both Honorius’ letter and the shift to a language of heresy to the late 620s. Corning, 170. See also Charles-Edwards, 365.

the Apostle Peter.⁵⁶ Unlike the Petrine tonsure, which was fashioned to imitate Christ's crown of thorns, the Celtic styling "[o]n the forehead...has indeed a superficial resemblance to a crown; but when you look at the neck, you will find the apparent crown cut short, so that you may fairly regard this fashion as characteristic of simoniacs and not of Christians."⁵⁷ While one's tonsure was not in itself proof of heretical leanings, those who wore it became "tainted by association," and it "became a very visible sign of allegiance" to either the Celtic-84 or the Dionysian party.⁵⁸ It also served as one more evidence of division within the universal Church.

Columbanus

An underlying assumption of much of popular Celtic Christian thought assigns the foregoing legalistic dissection of dates and conciliar decisions almost exclusively to the "Romanizers" while denying the Celts any participation in such apparent trivialities. The continental career of Columbanus, however, seriously challenges this assumption. His interactions both with his Frankish and Lombard colleagues and with the papacy in Rome demonstrate that the adherents of the Dionysian Easter were not the only ones to interpret the Easter Controversy in terms of doctrinal deviation.⁵⁹ In fact, Columbanus

⁵⁶ See Acts 8:9-25. Leslie Hardinge suggests a connection in the Roman mind between the hairstyle worn by the druidic *magi* and Simon's designation of "magus," wondering if perhaps the Celtic tonsure was a holdover from pagan times. Hardinge, 195.

⁵⁷ Bede *EH* V.21, in Sherley-Price, Latham, and Farmer, 317-20. John Dowden remarked: "The Celtic tonsure, as I understand it, like the Roman tonsure, showed a fringe of hair in front, but the top of the head was not shaved beyond a line drawn from ear to ear, so that, viewed from behind, there was nothing that marked the ecclesiastic or monk from the ordinary layman." John Dowden, *The Celtic Church in Scotland: Being an Introduction to the History of the Christian Church in Scotland down to the Death of Saint Margaret* (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge), 241-2.

⁵⁸ Corning, 13-14.

⁵⁹ Bede mentioned in the *Historia* a letter sent from Laurence, Augustine's successor to the archbishopric of Canterbury, to the Irish hierarchy. In this letter, Laurence described an encounter with an

might even be accused of instigating much of the paschal conflict that surrounded his communities; if this accusation holds, other dearly held tenets of popular Celtic Christian belief are called into question. The Celtic Church has been described as one which welcomed independent thinking, which was enlightened beyond the point of ritual, and which, above all, was an autonomous organization which “steadfastly rejected the authority of Rome.”⁶⁰ In Columbanus’ letters to the Holy See on the subject of the true Easter, however, a “Celtic Christian” emerges who was highly concerned with matters of orthodoxy, who had a strong interest in the liturgy of the Church, and who did not hesitate to appeal to Rome for clarification on what he considered to be an issue of the utmost importance to the Christian faith.

Columbanus, the most prominent of the early medieval Irish *peregrini*, was born at the midpoint of the sixth century in Leinster, in the southeast of Ireland. In the tradition of voluntary exile, he left his home around 570 and entered the northern monastery of Bangor; from here, twenty years later, he departed for the Frankish kingdoms of Gaul.⁶¹ Upon arriving at the Burgundian court of Guntram in 590, the Irishman founded the first

Irish bishop named Dagan, who upon visiting Kent “refused not only to eat with us but even to take his meal in the same house as ourselves,” presumably because of differences on the subject of Easter. Bede *EH* II.4, in Sherley-Price, Latham, and Farmer, 109-10.

⁶⁰ It is ironic that Robson’s statement concerning the Celts’ abhorrence for ritual should appear in the introduction to a book of purported Celtic liturgy. Pat Robson, ed., introduction to *A Celtic Liturgy* (London: HarperCollins, 2000), x; Robert Van de Weyer, ed., introduction to *Celtic Fire: The Passionate Religious Vision of Ancient Britain and Ireland* (New York: Doubleday, 1990), 17.

⁶¹ Jonas claimed that Columbanus left his home due to “the lust of lascivious maidens,” lest he fall prey to their wiles. Jonas of Bobbio, *Life of St. Columban* 7-11, trans. and ed. Dana Carleton Munro, rev. ed. (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1895), 3-7. Marie Therese Flanagan notes the heightened social status achieved by the *peregrinus pro Christi*: “The *peregrinus* renounced the world but the power which he attained in doing so as a representative of God and the saints prevented Irish society from renouncing him. A *peregrinus* acquired a legal status of immunity that was no longer circumscribed by political boundaries and therefore rendered nugatory an important element of his original ascetic impulse.” Marie Therese Flanagan, “The Contribution of Irish Missionaries and Scholars to Medieval Christianity,” in Brendan Bradshaw and Dáire Keogh, eds., *Christianity in Ireland: Revisiting the Story* (Dublin: The Columba Press, 2002), 35-6.

in a series of monastic communities at Annegray; shortly thereafter, due to the growing population of his first foundation, he moved on to establish the monasteries of Luxeuil and Fontaines.⁶² Dividing his time between these two houses, Columbanus established a rule which influenced monastic discipline in many regions of western Europe; in addition, there is evidence linking Luxeuil to a great number of subsequent foundations in the Frankish kingdoms, connections stemming from the saint's warm relations with a great many aristocratic families.⁶³ Expelled from Burgundy in 610 due to circumstances both political and doctrinal, Columbanus made his way to the court of Theudebert II at Metz; two years later, upon that king's death, the saint headed south into Lombardy where, under the auspices of the Lombard king Agilulf, he founded a community around a ruined church at Bobbio, high in the Appenines.⁶⁴ Columbanus' foundation at Bobbio "wrote history" in 628, becoming the first medieval monastery to receive a papal privilege, removing it from diocesan control and placing it directly under the aegis of the

⁶² Jonas, Columbanus' biographer, took the *peregrinus* from Ireland to the court of Sigibert I who, he claimed, was the ruler of the Frankish kingdoms of Austrasia and Burgundy. Jonas *LCol* 12, 17, in Munro, 7, 11. Sigibert, however, died in 575, fifteen years before Columbanus' arrival; also, he ruled only the kingdom of Austrasia, while his brother Guntram ruled the sister-kingdom of Burgundy. See Ian Wood, *The Merovingian Kingdoms, 450-751* (London: Longman, 1994), 344-5.

⁶³ "In Carolingian and modern historical writing," notes Wood, "his impact on the spiritual life of Francia is regarded as seminal, and certainly there was a dramatic increase in the number of monasteries founded in north-eastern and northern Francia, many of which can be shown to have been influenced in some way or other by Columbanus' foundations." It is important, however, to understand that "[t]he impact of the saint himself was by no means as widespread as that of Eustasius and the next generation of ascetics connected with Luxeuil." Wood, 185-9. This is a unique aspect of Columbanus' fame: unlike most, the saint was remembered not for his own actions but for a way of life bequeathed to his followers. Charles-Edwards writes of the second half of Jonas' *Life*: "We find there no miracles at a shrine, no relics of the holy man, but only disciples; and these disciples are not filled with *reverentia* for physical relics, signs in the world of sense-impressions of the hidden sanctity of the holy man, but are fired by love of Columbanus' rule and example." Charles-Edwards, 345-8.

⁶⁴ Jonas *LCol* 60, in Munro, 35. Jonas' explanation for Columbanus' expulsion makes him a victim of Brunhild's machinations. Charles-Edwards suggests that a more likely answer to this question lies in a combination of the weakness in 610 of Theuderic II, who had lost his kingdom to his brother Theudebert II, and the enmity, due to the Easter Controversy, of the Merovingian bishops, who took this opportunity to rid themselves of a continuing nuisance. Charles-Edwards, 371-2.

Roman See.⁶⁵ This was, however, after the saint's time; he died in 615, only three years after his arrival in Lombard territory, "a man advanced in years,...but unbroken in religious fervor and asceticism."⁶⁶

Columbanus' involvement in the Easter Controversy began in earnest in the late 590s. At this time, the kingdoms of Gaul were still celebrating Easter according to the Victorian table, which for three of the years between 590 and 600 listed two possible dates for the festival.⁶⁷ The confusion generated by this internal discrepancy during the Irishman's early years on the Continent would have shifted the focus of contention away from his alternate method of calculation, especially since in each of the three years in question the Celtic table was in agreement with one of the dates marked out by its Victorian counterpart.⁶⁸ From 597 to 610, however, all years for which Victorius calculated only one possible date for Easter, the Celtic-84 and Victorian tables offered opposing dates nine out of thirteen times; it is likely that the four instances in which the two did agree only served to underline the many more instances in which they did not. This changing dynamic explains both the delayed development of conflict between Columbanus and his Merovingian colleagues and the persistence of that conflict up to the

⁶⁵ Michael Richter, *Bobbio in the Early Middle Ages: The Abiding Legacy of Columbanus* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2008), 18-19.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 24.

⁶⁷ The Victorian table in 590 suggested both March 26 and April 2 as possible Easter dates, in 594 both April 11 and 18, and in 597 both April 7 and 14. Because of the decision of the Synod of Orleans in 541, which had instructed the Merovingian Church as a whole to adopt Victorius' calculation, this had the potential of dividing that church amongst itself. See Table 2.2, Corning, 25.

⁶⁸ In 590, the Celtic-84 listed March 26 as the correct date of Easter, in 594, April 11, and in 597, April 7. *Ibid.*

day itself that the Irishman left Gaul for Lombardy: no longer at odds with itself during this period, Victorius' table was in an unfettered position to clash with that of the Celts.⁶⁹

The internecine difficulties experienced by the Merovingian Church as it attempted to sort out the contradictory dating of the Victorian table in 590, 594, and 597 demonstrate the practical problems posed by the intricacies of paschal calculation; practical concerns, in fact, were a main factor in the ultimate abandonment of that table in the 640s. The importance of correct Easter dating to the medieval church is difficult to exaggerate. "It is not sufficiently appreciated," noted D.H. Farmer, "that different dates for Easter led inevitably to different dates for Lent, Ascension Day and Pentecost, because Easter is the pivot of the liturgical year."⁷⁰ The paschal feast stood at the heart of Christian practice, serving as a chronological marker for matters ranging from penance to ritual fasting to sexual conduct. A seventh-century canon attributed to Patrick went so far as to connect a person's Christian identity with the observance of Easter: the Eucharist must be taken "especially on the eve of Easter; for he who does not communicate at that time is not a believer."⁷¹ By this logic, one who did not know the correct date of the feast ran the risk of becoming a *de facto* excommunicate.

For Columbanus, this last was the fundamental issue at stake in the paschal controversy: correct practice inescapably was connected to correct belief. The argument over Easter tables carried with it the potential of undermining the identity itself of the Christian Church. In a letter written to Gregory the Great at the turn of the seventh

⁶⁹ Corning, 25-6.

⁷⁰ D.H. Farmer, introduction to Webb and Farmer, 23. "Imagine a present-day church congregation where some of the members thought it was Easter and the rest believed it was still four weeks away." Corning, 9.

⁷¹ *Canons Attributed to St. Patrick*, in McNeill and Gamer, 84.

century, Columbanus expressed clearly his concern for the foundational truths of the faith and the threat posed to those truths by the Victorian Easter table. Before discussing the content of this message, however, it is necessary to point out the preemptive nature of the Irishman's appeal to Rome: so far as is known, he was the first to involve the papacy in the paschal conflict then developing in Gaul.⁷² His action in appealing to the authority of Rome was not unprecedented, nor was it a surprising move by a cleric trained in the Irish Church, who "was proud to recall that Palladius, the first bishop of the Irish, was sent by Rome."⁷³ The Irishman's lack of pause in appealing to Gregory demonstrates that Columbanus, the "Celt," recognized "the right of the papacy to judge controversial matters."⁷⁴

In his letter to Gregory, the Irishman's overriding concern is with the unity of the Church, an ideal seriously threatened by a divided Easter.⁷⁵ Beyond this fundamental threshold loomed doctrinal oblivion. The founder of Luxeuil was not afraid to accuse his opponents of heretical leanings: because the Old Testament book of Deuteronomy prescribed seven days to the Feast of Unleavened Bread, beginning with the night of Passover on *luna* 14 and ending with *luna* 20, Victorius' addition of *luna* 21-22 to the range of acceptable lunar dates for Easter entailed an alteration of God's word and

⁷² Charles-Edwards notes that the first extant letter from Columbanus to Gregory was not the first he wrote, but that it was a response to the pope's response to a letter previously written on the same subject. Charles-Edwards, 369-70.

⁷³ Ibid., 375, 369. Caitlin Corning comments that "Columbanus' letters emphasize the fact that the Irish acknowledged their debt and obligation to Rome for the Christianization of Ireland." Corning, 32.

⁷⁴ This right, however, was not necessarily exercised indiscriminately, "the assumption being that the pope would not interfere unless asked to do so." Church councils were considered at this point to be the ultimate authority in ecclesiastical affairs. Ibid., 19, 31.

⁷⁵ Ibid., 24, 30. It is interesting that Columbanus directed his appeal to a pope who did not share his concern for uniformity in practice. See Charles-Edwards, 413.

disobedience of the Law.⁷⁶ Also, during Columbanus' sojourn in Gaul, the Victorian table had assigned the Easter feast to *luna* dates 21-22 seven times: because of the timing of sunset and moonrise, this meant that Easter was celebrated on days on which, for over nine hours, total darkness ruled the night. Moreover, the Victorian table, with its equinoctial date of March 21, prescribed Easter dates as early as March 22; this was, by the Celtic-84, three days before the equinox, which it held to fall on March 25. Either way, this led to dark Easters, celebrations on dates when the world spent more time in darkness than in light. "Since Easter at its heart is a celebration of humanity's deliverance from sin," writes Caitlin Corning, "a dark Easter symbolically denied the need for Jesus, 'the Light of the World,' to have died for mankind's salvation—an idea no Christian should ever support."⁷⁷ The issue of correct Easter observance, then, carried with it serious implications, both practical and theological.

The Synod of Whitby

Religion

In his letter to Gregory the Great, Columbanus revealed a deep concern for church unity by way of doctrinal and practical uniformity, and he appealed to the authority of St. Peter's see to uphold this ideal. By the time he drafted his second letter to Rome (in 604

⁷⁶ Corning, 27. Since "the issue of Easter turned on arguments from scripture," explains Charles-Edwards, "the same authority was cited for liturgical custom as for matters of theological belief. As a result it was thought that a refusal to uphold the custom sanctioned by scripture betrayed the very same attitude that lay behind doctrinal heresy." Charles-Edwards, 413.

⁷⁷ Corning, 26-7. "We are commanded," wrote abbot Ceolfrith to Nechtan, "to keep the full moon of the Paschal month after the equinox, so that first the sun may make day longer than night and then the moon may show the whole of her light face to the world, because first 'the Sun of Righteousness with healing in His wings,' that is the Lord Jesus, overcame all the darkness of death by the triumph of His Resurrection and then, having ascended into Heaven, sent down the Spirit from on high and so filled His Church, which is often symbolically described as the moon, with the light of inward grace." Bede *EH* V.21, in Sherley-Price, Latham, and Farmer, 315.

or 607), his tone had changed: having received no definitive response from Gregory, and having witnessed the condemnation of the Celtic-84 table at a council held at Chalon in 603, the Irishman's hopes for universal harmony had faltered, and he instead asked that Rome uphold the right of his communities to continue observing what he believed to be the true Easter.⁷⁸ This does not signal an acceptance on Columbanus' part of the Victorian table; rather, it shows his deep commitment to unity as it applied to his monastic foundations. One final letter written in the Frankish context, composed as his sentence of exile in 610 was being carried out, is proof of this concern: Columbanus feared that the unresolved issue of Easter dating was a threat that could be used in his absence to divide the Columbanian community against itself.⁷⁹ If the rest of the world refused to hear reason, then it was imperative that his followers remain unified against error and in support of the truth.

At the Synod of Whitby, fifty years later, a similar dynamic applied: there is no hint, either in Bede's or Stephanus' accounts of that gathering, of any universal ambitions on the part of Colman and the Irish faction, mainly because by this time they were fairly alone in their continued observance of the Celtic-84 Easter. At the Synod of Macon in 627, the Columbanian foundation at Luxeuil had adopted the Victorian table, as had the southern Irish churches at Mag nAilbe several years later. Both had since switched to the Alexandrian table of Dionysius Exiguus. Like Columbanus in his second letter to the papacy, Colman arrived at Whitby to defend the right of a specific group to continue celebrating the true Easter in the face of what seemed to be a worldwide apostasy. In this

⁷⁸ Corning, 29-30; Charles-Edwards, 370-1.

⁷⁹ Ibid., 368-9.

respect it is possible to view the meeting in 664 as a power struggle between unevenly matched factions, the Dionysian table throwing its almost universal support against the slowly dwindling foothold of the Celtic-84. It is not, however, accurate to see this division as a dichotomy between Celtic and Roman traditions; by the time of the Synod of Whitby, support for the Dionysian Easter was shared by almost everyone but the Christians of Northumbria and Iona.⁸⁰

Columbanus' first letter, however, proves that from its beginnings in Gaul there was much more to the Easter Controversy than a contest of authorities, and this is true also of the Synod of Whitby. Control was definitely an issue at Oswy's gathering, but it was control in the interests of orthodoxy. As with the Victorian table, the Celtic-84 table rarely agreed with the Dionysian—only twice between 660 and 682—and in some years the opposing dates were separated by nearly a month. Meanwhile, according to the adherents of either table, both listed dark Easters for 661, 663, 664, and 666. This meant that “for both the Celtic and Roman part[ies], their opponents were celebrating Easter on heretical dates,” and therefore each group felt itself justified in opposing the other.⁸¹ Also at issue at Whitby was the monastic tonsure: while Wilfrid never explicitly addresses this matter in the extant accounts of his argument at the synod, Bede mentions it as a topic of concern at the time of the gathering. Further proof that this was a point of disagreement in the Northumbrian Church up to and beyond the year of the Whitby

⁸⁰ Farmer, introduction to Webb and Farmer, 23.

⁸¹ The Celtic definition of a “dark Easter” has already been discussed. The Roman definition had to do with the moon's cycle: since their *luna* 1 was the night the new moon was first visible, the full moon fell for them on *luna* 15 rather than on the more astronomically correct *luna* 14. The Celtic-84, with its lunar limits of 14-20, sometimes called for the celebration of Easter on *luna* 14, which by Dionysian calculations was the night before the full moon. Since the appearance of the full moon symbolized the triumphant ascension of the risen Christ into heaven, allowing the feast to fall before the full moon also symbolically denied the need for his sacrifice. See Corning, 123, 186, 11.

debate may be found in Ceolfrith's letter to the Pictish king, Nechtan, in which the abbot questions the commitment of one who adopts a new Easter without also altering his outward appearance. That this was a matter of great spiritual significance is evident from the connection forged by Ceolfrith between one's tonsure and one's salvation; "we who desire to be saved by Christ's Passion," he declared, "like Peter wear this sign of the Passion on the crown of the head, which is the highest part of the body."⁸²

As with Columbanus' crusade on the Continent, the meeting at Whitby sought to unify the Church under a common practice. Oswy's opening exhortation at the synod carries this emphasis; according to Bede, the king "opened by observing that all who served the One God should observe one rule of life, and since they all hoped for one kingdom in heaven, they should not differ in celebrating the sacraments of heaven."⁸³

The argument from unity, however, was now on the side of the Romans: with the decision of the Columbanian communities of Gaul to abandon their founder's Easter, the Celtic-84 became, as Wilfrid pointed out at Whitby, very much a peripheral phenomenon. "[A]lthough your Fathers were holy men," he said to Colman at the synod, "do you imagine that they, a few men in a corner of a remote island, are to be preferred before the universal Church of Christ throughout the world?"⁸⁴ A great weight of tradition also was set against the Celtic faction: whereas Colman could point only to the Ionan Irish and outdated hermeneutics in support of the Celtic-84, Wilfrid had at his disposal the decisions of Nicaea and the 318 churchmen who had been in attendance:

⁸² Bede *EH* III.25, V.21, in Sherley-Price, Latham, and Farmer, 187, 317-20.

⁸³ Bede *EH* III.25, in Sherley-Price, Latham, and Farmer, 188.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 191.

This question has already been admirably treated by a gathering of our most holy and learned fathers, three hundred and eighteen strong, at Nicaea, a city in Bithynia. Among other things they decided upon a lunar cycle recurring every nineteen years. This cycle gives no room for celebrating Easter on the fourteenth day of the moon. This is the rule followed by the Apostolic See and by nearly the whole world. At the end of the decrees of the fathers of Nicaea come these words: "Let him who condemns any one of these decrees be anathema."⁸⁵

Between the reality of the Celtic-84's minority status and the acknowledged authority of conciliar decisions, there was very little doubt as to the outcome of the synod; the Irish were simply outnumbered.

Politics

In the end, according to Bede and Stephanus, Oswy's decision came down to apostolic authority; "[o]rthodoxy implied the preservation of the faith as it had been handed down from the apostles, but which was it to be," asks Charles-Edwards, "John or Peter?"⁸⁶ John had been known, according to the supporters of the Celtic-84, to celebrate Easter with the Jews on *luna* 14, and his example therefore offered sufficient proof of that table's scriptural integrity. This was not, however, adequate evidence in Wilfrid's opinion: John's actions belonged to a time when "the Apostles were not able...to abrogate the observances of the Law once given by God, lest they gave offence to believers who were Jews." The Apostle Peter, on the other hand, had recognized a need to celebrate a feast that was purely Christian, leaving behind Jewish practice and embracing the new Sabbath established by the Lord's resurrection. Moreover, it was Peter upon whom Jesus

⁸⁵ Eddius Stephanus *LW* 10, in Webb and Farmer, 117. This speech shows Wilfrid's willingness to bend the truth if it suited his purposes: the Dionysian table, which he defended at Whitby, was not developed until 525, a full two centuries after the Council of Nicaea.

⁸⁶ Charles-Edwards, 412.

had founded the Christian church; it was he who held the keys to the kingdom.⁸⁷ The power of Wilfrid's Petrine reference, recounted Bede, carried the day. "What [the Irish] believed they could not prove," remarked Edgar Gibson, "while the appeal to the majesty of the first apostle, with which their wily opponent concluded his speech, weighed with the superstitious king far more than any other argument."⁸⁸

The extent, however, to which apostolic arguments determined the outcome of the Synod of Whitby must be considered with care. A conspicuous feature of that gathering is the complete absence of any official representation from Rome. Wilfrid lately had arrived from the Holy See, according to Stephanus, "armed with the holy relics he had collected in Rome" and well-versed in the niceties of Easter calculation, but it would be unwarranted to portray him as an agent of the papacy in his role at Whitby.⁸⁹ At least five years had passed between Wilfrid's return from the Continent and the summoning of the synod; moreover, it was not Wilfrid who was originally intended to speak at Whitby for the Dionysian table, but "the foreign prelate" Agilbert, and there is no evidence at all linking the latter's presence to any official embassy from Rome.⁹⁰ The Frank, once the bishop of West Saxony and now occupying the see of Paris, apparently happened to be visiting his royal Northumbrian acquaintances, Oswy and Alhfrith, a coincidence which

⁸⁷ Bede *EH* III.25, in Sherley-Price, Latham, and Farmer, 189-90.

⁸⁸ Gibson, 115.

⁸⁹ Eddius Stephanus *LW* 5, in Webb and Farmer, 112.

⁹⁰ Eddius Stephanus *LW* 9-10, in Webb and Farmer, 116-17. Bede related that Birinus, Agilbert's predecessor in West Saxony, was despatched to that region by Pope Honorius, but this connection cannot be used as proof of a link between Rome and the Frank, who received his bishopric from Coenwalh, the ruler of that nation, as a result of his evangelistic efforts in the area. Bede *EH* III.25, 7, in Sherley-Price, Latham, and Farmer, 187-8, 153-4. Since Bede mentioned a connection between Birinus and Rome, it may be assumed that he would have done the same had a similar connection existed between Agilbert and the papacy. It is of some interest that Agilbert, the defender of Roman orthodoxy, was himself connected with the Columbanian tradition. See Charles-Edwards, 345.

emphasizes another key feature of the synod in 664: from Bede's account, it appears that the Synod of Whitby took place almost by chance. Oswy took advantage of the fact that a certain collection of individuals had congregated independently within the confines of his kingdom, and chose this occasion to convene his council.⁹¹ Rome itself appears to have played no official part in the events which unfolded at Whitby in 664; while Oswy indeed may have based his final decision upon the sacred authority of Peter, he at no point appears to have made any appeal to that apostle's pontifical heir. Even Canterbury failed to put in an appearance: neither Deusdedit, the current archbishop, nor any representative of his administration are included in Bede's list of those in attendance.⁹²

From the evidence, then, it would seem that the throne, and not the Church, was the driving force behind the meeting at Whitby in 664.⁹³ Oswy's motives in convening the council thus become necessary to a proper understanding of the event, and these are difficult to determine. According to Bede, his participation was driven by a deep concern for the well-being of the Church and that of his subjects; at the same time, there are in the events at Whitby pronounced political overtones which should not be ignored. At the time of the synod, Oswy was involved in an ongoing attempt to expand his authority,

⁹¹ Bede *EH* III.25, in Sherley-Price, Latham, and Farmer, 187. Charles-Edwards points out that, while the gathering in 664 is referred to consistently as the Synod of Whitby, this designation is misleading. It was instead a meeting of Oswy's royal council. He suggests that this distinction may explain Colman's refusal to abide by the council's decision and his subsequent withdrawal from Britain. Charles-Edwards, 317, 319.

⁹² Bede *EH* III.25, in Sherley-Price, Latham, and Farmer, 187-8.

⁹³ This royal action is not unprecedented: Chlothar II, of Burgundy, is associated with the Synod of Macon in 627, at which the continental Columbanian foundations abandoned the Celtic for the Victorian Easter. At this synod, however, the proceedings were governed by Treticus, bishop of Lyons, whereas at Whitby Oswy is identified unambiguously as the presiding authority. See Corning, 49, 51; Charles-Edwards, 364-5.

while at the same time holding together the territory that already was his.⁹⁴ From this precarious position he cannot have looked favorably upon the burgeoning partnership between his son Alhfrith, whom Bede identified as at one point having designs on his father's territory, and Wilfrid, recently returned from the Continent. Bede indicates a direct causality between this friendship and the Synod of Whitby, and Corning interprets Alhfrith's support of the Roman Easter as a subtle challenge to his father's sovereignty.⁹⁵ In light of this possible threat to his rule, Oswy's haste to summon a council to deal with the paschal question assumes a new significance. In one move, the king took the initiative away from his son and set himself up to be credited as the defender of the true Easter, simultaneously bolstering his position in the eyes of the Church and defusing Alhfrith's schemes vis-à-vis the Northumbrian throne. As the newly-minted champion of orthodoxy, Oswy's position in "a culture which interprets victory in battle as a sign of divine favor" was unassailable: to support him would be to enjoy divine protection, while to oppose him would be to court disaster.⁹⁶ Thomas Charles-Edwards has commented that "Oswiu's decision at Whitby to follow Peter was typical"; however, it was also quite convenient to his political situation at the time.⁹⁷

⁹⁴ Corning, 127.

⁹⁵ "Alhfrith's support of the Roman practices as the correct and orthodox tradition, therefore, had political implications. His actions would have been a challenge to his father; at the very least calling into question the orthodoxy of the king....Alhfrith may have been using the claim that he held to correct practices as part of a plan to strengthen his own power and influence." *Ibid.*, 122. See also Bede *EH* III.14, 25, in Sherley-Price, Latham, and Farmer, 164-5, 187; Charles-Edwards, 318-19.

⁹⁶ Clare Stancliffe, "Oswald, 'Most Holy and Victorious King of the Northumbrians,'" in Clare Stancliffe and Eric Cambridge, eds., *Oswald: Northumbrian King to European Saint* (Stamford, UK: Paul Watkins, 1995), 70.

⁹⁷ Charles-Edwards, 412.

While, then, it is unwise completely to discount Bede's description of Oswy's piety and concern for Christian unity, it is also imprudent to ignore the extent to which local politics influenced both the convocation and the outcome of the Synod of Whitby. Too much emphasis may be placed upon both Wilfrid's loquacity and Oswy's credulity, and too little upon the latter's political acumen. When the conspicuous absence of Roman representation at Whitby is added to this equation, it begins to appear as if the Synod of Whitby was perhaps not, after all, the culmination of a quarrel between two opposing Christian traditions—the Celtic and the Roman—but between two rival members of the Northumbrian royal house. The impact of Oswy's judgment was certainly great: because of the preponderance of the Northumbrian Church in the latter half of the seventh century, the decision at Whitby to embrace the Dionysian Easter table was one which reached into all corners of Britain, leading ultimately to the Synod of Hertford under Theodore of Tarsus, at which the whole of the Anglo-Saxon Church followed suit.⁹⁸ However, the result of Oswy's decision must not be too readily equated with his reasons for reaching it. The evidence suggests that in 664, the Celtic-84 Easter in Northumbria fell victim not to a war between a Roman Church and a Celtic, but to a political struggle between Oswy and Alhfrith, not over issues of orthodoxy, but in a contest for the Northumbrian throne.

Conclusion

Unwilling to abide by the decision reached at the Synod of Whitby, Colman gave up both the argument and his diocese of Lindisfarne and returned to Ireland via Iona, with

⁹⁸ See Corning, 129; Farmer, notes, in Sherley-Price, Latham, and Farmer, 371; Bede *EH* IV.5, in Sherley-Price, Latham, and Farmer, 212-15.

all those who wished to continue celebrating according to the Celtic-84 Easter table. History leaves them divided between two Irish communities founded by Colman, one at Inishboffin and the other at Mayo, the former for Irish monks and the latter for English.⁹⁹ Meanwhile, Wilfrid's fortunes soared, at least for the moment: his heroism at Whitby was greatly rewarded with his election to the episcopate, and he received the ancient see of Paulinus in York.¹⁰⁰ Christianity in Northumbria had come full circle; Iona's influence departed with Colman, and Canterbury's authority, diminished since the days of Edwin and Ethelberga, was reinstated. More significantly, a giant step had been taken toward the doctrinal and practical uniformity so important to both sides in the paschal dispute. While it did not mark the end of the Easter Controversy, the Synod of Whitby was an important moment both in the resolution of that conflict and in the broader history of the English Church.¹⁰¹

In a good portion of popular Celtic Christian thought, the outcome of the Synod of Whitby has been framed in terms of one church dominating another. The meeting, however, in 664 was not an encounter between two churches but between two parties within the Northumbrian Church, one led by Colman, the other by Wilfrid. Rome, by all accounts, was not directly involved. While Bede fairly may be accused of shaping certain details in the *History* to his own purposes, since he was a supporter himself of the Dionysian Easter, there does not seem to be any good reason to suppose that he would obfuscate on the issue of Rome's involvement. Moreover, the extent to which these

⁹⁹ Bede *EH* III.26, IV.4, in Sherley-Price, Latham, and Farmer, 192, 211-12.

¹⁰⁰ Eddius Stephanus *LW* 11-12, in Webb and Farmer, 118-20.

¹⁰¹ Corning, 129.

parties were involved in the actual convocation of the synod is left unclear in the available sources; Oswy, the king, emerges as the prime mover in the events which transpired on that day in the seventh century. The possibility of friction between himself and his son, Alhfrith, causes one to question whether Oswy's interest in the Synod of Whitby, and by extension in the larger matter of Easter calculation, related more to political exigency than to spiritual concerns.

Furthermore, the language of domination assumes a lack of meaningful content in the Whitby debate: the Roman bully, for no other reason than self-aggrandizement, arrived to beat back the innocent adherents of the Celtic tradition. This is a false assumption on two points. First, as has been seen in the case of Columbanus, the adherents of the Celtic Easter were far from innocent bystanders in the Easter Controversy; in fact, it appears that it was Columbanus, the "Celt," who fired the first shot by calling on Gregory the Great for support. Second, the Dionysian faction was not the only one armed with highly technical scriptural arguments in defense of their Easter table. By all evidence, the adherents of the Celtic-84 were just as enmeshed in these so-called trivialities as were their Dionysian opponents. Both sides viewed their rivals as heretical to some degree, and both sides were concerned with the implications of the other's beliefs for the identity and fate of the Christian faith. The matters involved in the Whitby debate were far from meaningless; indeed, they spoke to the very heart of Christian life and practice.

In all of this, however, one question remains unanswered. What was the nature of the relationship between the Northumbrian tradition and that of Rome? The episode at Whitby reveals far less on this subject than popular Celtic Christian thought suggests; as

has been determined, the contest at Whitby cannot accurately be couched in terms of a conflict between Northumbria and Rome, as the latter seems to have had no official involvement in the Synod of Whitby. The life and writings of Columbanus are extremely informative as to his understanding of the role of the papacy in the Christian Church, but they offer only inferences concerning the mentality of his Anglo-Saxon brethren, coming as they did from the pen of one Irishman on the Continent some fifty years before the Synod of Whitby took place. In order to answer this question, one must look not at Whitby but around it, to the missionaries who came before and the achievements which followed. Under such scrutiny, a singular truth emerges: the Celts and their Roman contemporaries not only shared a religious tradition, but cooperated closely in its development.

CHAPTER THREE

The Celts and Christendom

The Synod of Whitby, “that great set-piece confrontation between ‘Celtic’ and ‘Roman’ Christianity,” writes Ian Bradley, is one of the main culprits in the perpetuation of “a romantic view of Celtic Christianity as a gentle, anarchic, deeply spiritual movement crushed by the authoritarian weight of Roman bureaucracy and imperialism.”¹ An image has been constructed of a Roman monolith, caught up in a fit of jealousy and top-heavy from hierarchical over-development, sweeping down upon an unsuspecting Celtic community and cutting it off at the peak of its success.² In the process, a religious expression defined by uninhibited worship and devoid of pious affectation, “appreciative of the world around [it], wondering and reverent of God’s awesome power, and impulsive in love,” was replaced by one ruled by “a quasi-military power,” inflexible, cold, and power-hungry.³ Those who accept this view of the events which unfolded at the Northumbrian abbey in 664 have erected an ideological tombstone in honor of a tradition’s demise; by the time Bede finished his *Ecclesiastical History* in 731, lamented Nora Chadwick, “[t]he Celtic Church had passed like a dream in the night.”⁴

¹ Ian Bradley, *Celtic Christianity: Making Myths and Chasing Dreams* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1999), 24-5.

² See George G. Hunter III, *The Celtic Way of Evangelism: How Christianity Can Reach the West...Again* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2000), 38-41.

³ Pat Robson, ed., introduction to *A Celtic Liturgy* (London: HarperCollins Publishers, 2000), x; Shirley Toulson, *The Celtic Alternative: The Christianity We Lost* (London: Century, 1987), 3.

⁴ Nora Chadwick, *The Age of the Saints in the Early Celtic Church* (Newcastle-upon-Tyne, UK: University of Newcastle-upon-Tyne Press, 1960), 1.

From the other side of the fence, however, an army of scholars advises caution; news of the death of Celtic Christianity, they warn, is somewhat premature. If indeed there ever was an entity which rightly may be called “the Celtic Church,” a proposition which lately has become the subject of considerable critical review, then its lifespan far outstripped the publication of the *History*, and even the death of its author. Whitby cannot be identified as the resting place of a tradition, nor should it be viewed as the hijacking of one by another; what remains is to define more clearly its true place in the timeline both of the Easter Controversy and of the development of Celtic Christianity. This definition will be constructed from the historical data available, but will also take into account the position held by the synod in the minds of its primary historians, Eddius Stephanus and Bede. Ultimately, the resolution in Northumbria of the Easter dilemma will be revealed as a significant but inconclusive step in a process which survived the gathering in 664 by more than one hundred years.

The previous chapter demonstrated the extent to which Celtic involvement in the Easter Controversy, the launchpad of the synod in question, closely approximated that of their Continental and Roman counterparts. Their concerns were the same; their proofs, while ultimately used to bolster divergent conclusions, each were taken from the same scriptural sources and (as in the problem of “dark” Easters) involved identical theological concepts; and both sides in the debate were more than willing from time to time to appeal to papal authority in support of their cause. Given these shared characteristics, it becomes impossible to view the event itself at Whitby Abbey as a clash between two alienated church traditions, one obsessed with doctrine, the other careless of it. Instead, it must be understood as a meeting between two parties within one tradition, both with a

vested interest in preserving their interpretation of a shared doctrine, and each armed with a good deal of meticulous evidence in support of its respective interpretation.

Building from this hypothesis, this chapter also will explore the relationship between the Christians in the British Isles and their contemporaries in the balance of Western Europe, beginning with the fifth-century mission of Patrick, the proposed patriarch of the Celtic Church. Some thought will be given to the former's connection both to the Church in Rome and to the Church universal, in order to determine how much of his independence from a wider tradition was real, and how much the product of latter-day wishful thinking. Briefly, the argument will return to Columbanus to illustrate his deep entanglement in ecclesiastical affairs far beyond the context merely of the Easter Controversy. Finally, it will address the development of the penitential, a religious and cultural phenomenon identified closely with the Celtic churches of Ireland and Britain. In so doing, the concept of two absolutely opposed and noninteractive religious traditions, characterized by disdain on the Roman side and indifference on the Celtic, will be held up and challenged as untenable. It will become clear in the end that the Celts and the Continent not only shared a religious tradition, but cooperated closely in its development.

The Great Anticlimax

Given the melodramatic tones sounded in the popular version of the Whitby episode, the visitor to its historical setting may well be surprised to discover that the seventh-century synod, reputedly the event for which Whitby “won a lasting place in

English church history,”⁵ is not a central element in the site’s tourist experience; in fact, it receives remarkably little attention. Hild, the noble founder and first abbess of the community; Caedmon, the peasant-poet, and his contribution to English literary tradition; the ins and outs of life in a medieval Benedictine monastery—these are among the details which confront the curious tourist. Wilfrid, Colman, and the rest of those who locked horns at the Easter synod seem to have no place. A newcomer to the intricacies of church history quite conceivably might leave the site completely unaware of its close connection to the doctrinal controversies of the Middle Ages. How does one reconcile the touted importance of an event described by one author as a “battle of words which...was even more of a turning point in the history of [the British Isles] than the battle fought out by contending armies at Hastings in 1066” with the persistent silence on the subject which one encounters when standing in the nave itself of the old, timeworn church?⁶

Whitby in Historical Context

This impression of contradiction is testimony to a fundamental misunderstanding of the events of 664 on the part of many proponents of the Celtic Christian myth. By all evidence, the meeting at Whitby Abbey was not the climactic encounter described in such lurid detail in a good portion of the popular literature, “a kind of Armageddon between an overbearing, bureaucratic ‘Roman Church’ on the one hand and a small, self-effacing ‘Celtic Church’ on the other.”⁷ While it does represent one of the more visible episodes in the doctrinal struggle between the Dionysian and Celtic-84 Easters, remarks Charles-

⁵ Rodney Castleden, *English Castles: A Photographic History* (New York: Barnes & Noble, 2006), 156.

⁶ Toulson, 9. See also Bradley, 201.

⁷ Donald E. Meek, *The Quest for Celtic Christianity* (Edinburgh: The Handsel Press, 2000), 138.

Edwards, the “so-called Synod of Whitby...was only one step in a long process, lasting for a century, by which the Celtic Easter and tonsure gave way to those sanctioned by Rome [and the rest of Western Europe],” a process which did not run its course until the latter years of the eighth century.⁸ After 664 and Colman’s return to Ireland, the island community of Iona held out for another half century before adopting the Dionysian Easter table, during part of which time—between 690 and 716—the brethren of that community were divided amongst themselves on the issue. The combined efforts of Adomnán, the community’s abbot, and Egbert, a British *peregrinus*, were necessary finally to bring about the change in practice which carried Iona into the ranks of common procedure. Corning notes that this decision also may have been affected by the Picts’ adoption of the Dionysian table several years earlier in 712, in response to the letter sent to the Pictish king Nechtan by Ceolfrith of Wearmouth-Jarrow. Even the Ionan decision to abandon the Celtic-84, however, did not bring the Easter Controversy to a close. It was not until 768, over a century after the supposedly decisive synod at Whitby, that the British churches of Wales and Cornwall set aside the Celtic calculation in favor of the Dionysian.⁹

As it was not a climactic encounter, neither was its outcome particularly unexpected. When Wilfrid stood at Whitby to defend the Dionysian method of Easter

⁸ Thomas M. Charles-Edwards, *Early Christian Ireland* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 317. Donald Meek characterizes the synod as simply “part of an on-going attempt to bring uniformity to the diverse practices of Christendom.” Meek, 138. See also Ted Olsen, *Christianity and the Celts* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 154-5. Olsen’s is one of the more balanced accounts which might be included in the ranks of “popular literature.”

⁹ Caitlin Corning, *The Celtic and Roman Traditions: Conflict and Consensus in the Early Medieval Church* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 150-68. See also Charles-Edwards, 410; Bede, *Ecclesiastical History of the English People* V.15, V.22, in Leo Sherley-Price, R.E. Latham, and D.H. Farmer, trans. and ed., *Ecclesiastical History of the English People with Bede’s Letter to Egbert and Cuthbert’s Letter on the Death of Bede*, rev. ed. (London: Penguin Books, 1990), 293-5, 321-2.

calculation, comments Peter Brown, he had in some ways “pushed triumphantly against an open door.”¹⁰ The issues debated at Whitby were not new business: divergences in the celebration of Easter had been contested hotly throughout Western Europe since Columbanus had gone into voluntary exile on the Continent and had come into conflict with his Merovingian and Italian colleagues over the paschal observance. From the 630s, the Christians of southern Ireland had begun the slow process of conversion to the Easter tables in use by their continental brethren (first the Victorian, then the Dionysian), tables in use in Canterbury presumably since the arrival of Augustine in 597. By the time, therefore, that the Celtic-84 and Dionysian parties gathered at Whitby to discuss the issue, the Northumbrian Church was to a large degree surrounded by opposing viewpoints.¹¹ “Thus, when they listened to Wilfrid’s denunciations at Whitby,” remarked Brown, “many Irish and Saxon supporters of the customs of Iona must have thought that they had heard it all before, and from fellow-Irishmen.”¹² As Wilfrid and Colman clashed at the Northumbrian abbey, external pressure had mounted to such an extent that conformity to universal standards was truly the only viable option.¹³

¹⁰ Peter Brown, *The Rise of Western Christendom: Triumph and Diversity, A.D. 200-1000*, 2nd ed., The Making of Europe, ed. Jacques Le Goff (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2003), 361.

¹¹ “By now,” explained D.H. Farmer, “southern Ireland had conformed and some of the most intransigent Romanists, such as Ronan, were of the Irish race. Thirty years earlier [before 664] the Irish abbot Cummian had complained that Iona seemed to think that Rome was wrong, Alexandria was wrong, Gaul was wrong and only Iona and a tip of Ireland were right.” D.H. Farmer, introduction to *The Age of Bede*, trans. and ed. J.F. Webb and D.H. Farmer, rev. ed. (London: Penguin Books, 1998), 23. See also Corning, 19-44, 81-94.

¹² Brown, 362.

¹³ “In the second half of the seventh century there was enough momentum in favour of this...ruling within the British Isles for it to be impossible, in the end, to resist the Dionysiac Easter.” Charles-Edwards, 411.

According to Charles-Edwards, the Synod of Whitby fell into the third of four phases within the broader Easter Controversy. “The first phase,” he suggests, “was continental and Columbanian,” touched off by that saint’s arrival in Gaul in the last decade of the sixth century. This was followed in the 620s by the addition of Ireland itself to the stage upon which the controversy was played out. Again, Columbanus may take a measure of the blame: Bobbio, his community in the Apennines, and its relations with Rome, seems to have been the catalyst which led, by way of papal communiques and a brace of synods, to the decision of the southern Irish “in favour of what it took to be the universal custom of the Church.” Charles-Edwards’ fourth and final phase unfolded in the years following the Synod of Whitby, and comprised the stages by which Iona, and finally the British churches of Wales and Cornwall, exchanged their insular practices for those of the wider Christian Church. Lost in the midst of all this tumultuous change one finds Oswy’s Constantinian venture into the intricacies of orthodoxy, which, while deciding the issue for the clerics under his rule, neither decided nor ended the controversy as a whole.¹⁴

Whitby in the Sources

The argument from silence. In the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, the year of the synod arrives and passes without the slightest mention of Oswy’s intervention in ecclesiastical affairs. Only a hint of the proceedings slips through the chronicler’s rehearsal of the events of 664: he recorded that “Colman with his companions went to his native land,”

¹⁴ Charles-Edwards, 408, 408-11.

and that in the same year Wilfrid was exalted to episcopal rank.¹⁵ While both of these episodes took place very much within the context of the Easter synod, Whitby itself goes without mention.¹⁶ Dating from the turbulent years of the later ninth century, the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, according to Michael Swanton, reflected “both the ‘revival of learning’ and [the] revival of English national awareness during the reign of King Alfred.” Given its context, Swanton underlines the significance of the Chronicle’s vernacular composition: it was “the first continuous national history of any western people in their own language,” a fact which indicates a higher than usual degree of confidence on the part of the English nation in its emerging cultural identity.¹⁷ It seems strange that the Synod of Whitby, which appears to have been a seminal moment in the development of the English Church, elevating it to a position of greater authority vis-à-vis its Irish and British counterparts, should be passed over in silence in such a celebratory project. The synod’s absence from the record becomes even more conspicuous when one considers the chronicler’s meticulous commemoration of countless other ecclesiastical events.¹⁸

Because of its comparatively late origin—the record begins with Year 1 and closes with the Peterborough manuscript’s entry for 1154—the Chronicle’s early compiler was forced to look, for events that took place before his time, to the work of previous chroniclers, much of which he copied verbatim. One such source appears to

¹⁵ *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, trans. and ed. Michael Swanton (London: J.M. Dent, 1996; New York: Routledge, 1998), 34-5.

¹⁶ The abbey appears only once in the Chronicle, to mark the passage of its renowned abbess, Hild, in 680. *ASC*, in Swanton, 38-9. See also 34n3, where Swanton points out that all mention of the synod also was omitted from the Old English translation of Bede’s *History*.

¹⁷ Michael Swanton, introduction to *ASC*, xviii, xx.

¹⁸ See, for example, the entries for 667, 668, and 670, in *ASC*, 34-5.

have been the chronological summary with which Bede concluded the *Ecclesiastical History*. The entry for 664 bears evidence of this debt: the similarities between Bede's record and the Chronicle's are unmistakable.¹⁹ The chronicler's omission of that year's Easter-related events, then, seems to derive from a similar silence in Bede, who in his summary also failed explicitly to mention the Synod of Whitby. Neither did the monk of Jarrow mention the gathering in his *Greater Chronicle*, in which he offered a brief synopsis of "the six ages of the world."²⁰ Once again, considering the formative role of the Easter question in Bede's historical narrative, his apparent dismissal of one of the controversy's central episodes requires some explanation.

N.J. Higham, a professor of early medieval history at the University of Manchester, detects in these omissions an effort to downplay Irish (Celtic) participation in the development of the Northumbrian Church.²¹ Claiming that Bede's chronological summary sought to exalt the Roman mission in Britain (by way of Gregory I and Augustine) at the expense of the Celtic, Higham suggests that in the recapitulation "the Irish input to English conversion is only a matter of inference..., via the death of Aidan (651) and retirement of Colman in 664."²² In Bede's conclusion, the only mention of a figure directly connected to Irish missionary work in Britain is of Columba and his efforts

¹⁹ Swanton, xviii-xix. Some details are added to Bede's by the various chroniclers. Otherwise, the entries are virtually identical. See *ASC*, in Swanton, 34-5; Bede *EH* V.24, in Sherley-Price, Latham, and Farmer, 327.

²⁰ Bede, *A Chronicle of the Six Ages of the World*, in J.A. Giles, trans., *The Historical Works of Venerable Bede*, vol. 2 (London: James Bohn, 1845), 220, 286-8.

²¹ In his entry for 664, notes Higham, Bede "notably failed to mention the synod of Whitby..., which had been such a significant feature of the main text..., so obviating the need to tell the story of Irish missionary activity among the Northumbrians to that date." N.J. Higham, *(Re-)Reading Bede: The Ecclesiastical History in Context* (London: Routledge, 2006), 90.

²² *Ibid.*, 88.

among the Picts, an allusion which leaves the Irishman's connection to the English Church, through Aidan, unacknowledged. Also, the monk of Jarrow includes a reference to Palladius, first bishop of the Irish, who was commissioned for this task by Pope Celestine I.²³ In this latter entry, Higham sees an attempt by Bede "both to give Rome the ultimate credit for Irish Christianity and to provide evidence of the papacy's continuing concern for the spiritual well-being of the British Isles" after the withdrawal of Roman troops in 410.²⁴

This interpretation of Bede's concluding summary then is expanded to take in the whole of his fifth book:

Finally, we have focused on how [Bede's rhetorical] strategies worked in the context of his final and longest book, V, showing how Bede used his survey of the recent past as a vehicle via which to preach particular messages to his audience. Embedded here are two fundamental assertions, backed up with proofs that these are not just Bede's own judgements but God's. One is the proposal that Northumbria in the present boasted churchmen who should be viewed as at the very heart of the Catholic Church: Bede considered that key individuals should be numbered among its shock-troops in the continuing project, begun by the apostles and continuing under the leadership of the papacy, to spread Catholicism to the far corners of the world.²⁵

In this formulation, Higham presents "the English...as agents of Rome," and the monk of Jarrow as their publicist.²⁶ As evidence, he points to the "numerical dominance" of Roman references—both to the Holy See itself and to English sites with close ties to the papacy—in Bede's recapitulation. He also points out the added emphasis in the summary on Paulinus as the first bishop of Northumbria, and on the primacy of Edwin as its first

²³ See entries for 565 and 430, in Bede *EH* V.24, in Sherley-Price, Latham, and Farmer, 325-6.

²⁴ Higham, 87.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 185.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 182.

Christian king. This is done, claims Higham, in order to reiterate the foundational role of the Northumbrian kings in northern Christianity, while at the same time remolding events into “a specifically ‘Romanist’ story.”²⁷

Higham’s theory is a provocative one, but it also exhibits some signs of weakness. If indeed Bede’s intention in his chronological summary was to exalt the Anglo-Roman Church at the expense of the Irish (Celtic), the Synod of Whitby seems an odd detail to leave out. It was, by many accounts, weighty evidence of the former’s triumph and the latter’s defeat. Moreover, the multiple mentions of Rome and its satellites in the recapitulation need not be understood as partisan leanings toward a monarchical papacy, or away from the insular tradition. “It is important to remember,” Caitlin Corning reminds her reader, “that all those adhering to the Celtic and Roman traditions acknowledged the special role of the papacy, so these terms do not distinguish between those who honored the bishop of Rome and those who did not.”²⁸ Speaking of what he has dubbed “micro-Christendoms,” Peter Brown notes that, peripheral as it may have been in its geographic situation, Bede’s Britain was never marginal in its relationship to the wider Christian Church. “It shared,” he continues, “with the many ‘micro-Christendoms’ which stretched, like so many beads on a string, from Iona across Europe and the Middle East to Iran and Central Asia, a common pool of images and attitudes inherited from ancient Christianity.”²⁹ If Corning and Brown are correct in their

²⁷ “In contrast with the main text, the Irish mission is seriously neglected, despite inclusion of the foundation of Iona. So there is, for example, no mention of Lindisfarne or the arrival of Aidan, and the reigns of Oswald and Oswiu are predominantly a list of deaths.” Higham, 85, 99, 88-9.

²⁸ She points out, in the context of Columbanus’ interactions with the papacy, that “he did recognize the role of the pope as leader of the church and took the papacy to task for not effectively exercising this authority,” as most clerics of his day felt free to do. Corning, 4, 33, 19.

²⁹ Brown, 378.

assessment of English (and Celtic) participation in the “patchwork of adjacent, but separate, ‘micro-Christendoms’” of which the seventh-century Church was composed, then Bede’s Roman references in his conclusion to the *Ecclesiastical History*, seen as probative by Higham, do not have any necessarily partisan connotations.³⁰

All of Higham’s proposed explanation depends to a great extent upon the summary having been added after the history’s first-draft review at court:

The shift from an ‘Oswaldian’ past to an ‘Edwinian’ one, plus the addition of six events unmentioned in the main text, arguably reveal an author struggling to amend the text he had written without taking on the enormous task of a complete rewrite. The most plausible interpretation would be that Bede only decided to add this final chapter after he received back his first draft. If his change of emphasis in the recapitulation accurately reflects the comments attached thereto, then this final response may imply that his original manuscript had been read by clerics closer to the traditions of history which Bede had himself earlier espoused, and which we might envisage as popular at this date at Whitby or York, rather than Lindisfarne.³¹

Tracing what he sees as repeated revolutions in Bede’s thought from the *Greater Chronicle* through the *History* and into the recapitulation, Higham suggests the likelihood of “Bede’s adoption of this very different [Irish] vision of the past in the central sections of the *EH* reflect[ing] his perception of the preferences of his audience, rather than his own personal position on these issues.” By the time of the summary’s addition, Higham argues, Bede once again “felt able to abandon” the Hiberno-centric stance in which so much of the main text was grounded.³² The author proposes a possible political element

³⁰ Brown, 364.

³¹ Higham, 100, 82-4.

³² “If the recapitulation was then appended by Bede somewhat later to the main text, in the process of amending his great historical opus, then yet another shift now becomes visible. We can see him here in retreat from the vision of history enshrined in the main text, with all of Oswald, Aidan and Colman losing significance and the emphasis reverting back towards the more ‘Romanist’ stance which he had first adopted [in the *Greater Chronicle*] c. 725.” Ibid., 194-5.

in this new-found freedom (although he cannot with precision identify what it might have been): “there seems scant sign,” he posits, “of a better reason for such dramatic shifts of perspective on an issue concerning which one might reasonably have expected Bede to have adhered consistently to a ‘Romanist’ line.”³³ This argument, however, assumes Bede’s default position to have been one of sympathy toward Rome, in the presence of which attitude his focus in the main text on the Irish missionaries of Oswald’s day merely represented a tendency in the monk of Jarrow toward blatant sophistry. Such a characterization is a far cry from that proposed by the great majority of Bede scholars, in whose estimation he was an “author [who] was patient, truthful, eloquent, and a master of the Latin language.”³⁴ What is more, it appears to be in direct contradiction of Higham’s own conclusions regarding Book Three of the *History* (which contains the bulk of Bede’s Irish material), which he suggests “should be seen as the moral focus of the entire work and at the very heart of his endeavour.”³⁵ It is this internal inconsistency, more than any other consideration, which leads one to search out an alternative explanation for Bede’s silence on the Synod of Whitby in his two summaries.

While the monk of Jarrow has been characterized by many as “an apologist for Roman Christianity,” Ian Bradley views this as too sweeping a statement. The Synod of Whitby, which appears as a centerpiece of the *History*, must not be allowed to obscure the reverence and respect for the Celtic missionaries of Iona which permeates a significant amount of Bede’s narrative, and the apparent contempt in which he held the

³³ Higham, 195-6.

³⁴ D.H. Farmer, introduction to *EH*, in Sherley-Price, Latham, and Farmer, 34.

³⁵ Higham, 144.

more sedentary form of Christianity which followed in the Roman wake.³⁶ Unlike Eddius Stephanus, the author of the *Life of Wilfrid*, who favored Rome because Rome favored his mentor and subject, Bede's interest in the meeting of 664 was pastoral rather than political. It was not so much the Celts' refusal to acknowledge the authority of the Holy See that disturbed him, as it was the tendency of the controversy to divide and weaken the universal Church.³⁷ Therefore, while Bede did stand in opposition to the continued use in Northumbria of the Celtic-84, he did so not primarily as a Roman apologist but as a proponent of Christian unity.

The centrality of Easter—and its implications for church harmony—to Bede's purposes is evident in the role it played in shaping the author's narrative in the *History*. His final chapter of substance (V.22) is dedicated to an account of Iona's decision ultimately to embrace the Dionysian calculation, a triumphant finale tempered by a sobering observation:

In contrast [to the Ionan brethren] the Britons, who had refused to share their own knowledge of the Christian Faith with the English, continue even now, when the English nation believes rightly, and is fully instructed in the doctrines of the Catholic Faith, to be obdurate and crippled by their errors, going about with their heads improperly tonsured, and keeping Christ's solemnity without fellowship with the Christian Church.³⁸

³⁶ "Completed in 731, [the *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*] appeared at a critical time in both the political and religious history of the British Isles, when the identity of its constituent nations was being forged and the era of itinerant missionary activity was giving way to one of more settled ecclesiastical structures. As a historian, Bede's natural inclination was to look back, and he presented the pure and primitive 'Celtic' Church as a model against which the church of his own day was judged and found wanting." Bradley, 25.

³⁷ This focus is evident from Bede's description of the synod itself, which was occasioned in part by confusion at court and consternation among the people. See Bede *EH* III.25, in Sherley-Price, Latham, and Farmer, 186-7.

³⁸ Bede *EH* V.22, in Sherley-Price, Latham, and Farmer, 321-2.

Since Bede completed his history four years before his death, it is not unreasonable to assume that he saw in the Ionan conversion a suitable conclusion to his tale, a sense heightened in the reader by a mood of denouement which characterizes the closing paragraphs of his account. D.H. Farmer notes the importance of Easter in Book Five of the *History*, in which “Northumbrian influences penetrate...to Pictland and Iona, whose acceptance of the Roman [Dionysian] Easter marks the end of disunity.” This is a significant element, according to Farmer, in Bede’s perception of “the maturity of the Church.”³⁹

It is evident that the monk of Jarrow, in his final comments, drew a direct connection between the decisions by both the Picts and the Ionan brethren to adopt the Dionysian Easter, and the general harmony which defined relations among the various occupants of Britain from 716 to the completion of the *History* in 731. “At the present time,” he wrote, “the Picts have a treaty of peace with the English, and are glad to be united in Catholic peace and truth to the universal Church.” The Irish in the Isle were also a party to this peaceful coexistence; they “are content with their own territories, and do not contemplate any raids or stratagems against the English.”⁴⁰ Bede’s understanding of the social implications of Christian unity is clear in his conclusory remarks, and implicit in this understanding is his further perception of a correct Easter celebration as the key to this unified stance. This emphasis is evident in his only caveat to his description of the harmonious state of English affairs: the only fly in his ointment is the persistent stubbornness of the British, who continue to “uphold their own bad customs

³⁹ Farmer, introduction to *EH*, 32.

⁴⁰ Bede *EH* V.23, in Sherley-Price, Latham, and Farmer, 324.

against the true Easter of the Catholic Church.” Even this, however, works to the good of Bede’s narrative purpose. In their misguided and willful isolation, the British “are opposed by the power of God and man alike, and are powerless to obtain what they want.”⁴¹ Not only did the Easter settlement bring each participating nation into healthy relationships with one another, it also united them under the banner of divine truth against those who would continue to threaten the integrity of the Church. Furthermore, until the British acknowledged the error of their ways and embraced the true Easter, they would remain beyond the reach of social redemption.

When this interpretation of Bede’s didactic framework in the *Ecclesiastical History* is taken into consideration, his omission of the Synod of Whitby, both in the *Greater Chronicle* and in his chronological summary of English history, begins to make sense. His reasoning becomes even clearer when one discovers his inclusion, in both, of the adoption by Iona of the true Easter calculation.⁴² In Bede’s mind, the coming together of the Church in Britain around the Dionysian Easter, a process completed (albeit imperfectly) by the Ionan *volte face*, represented an apocalyptic culmination of a process in motion since the beginning of time. Referencing the words of the Old Testament prophet Micah, Bede recounted a cease-fire among the peoples of Britain: “many of the Northumbrians,” he declared, “both noble and simple, together with their children, have laid aside their weapons, preferring to receive the tonsure and take

⁴¹ Bede *EH* V.23, in Sherley-Price, Latham, and Farmer, 324.

⁴² In the *Ecclesiastical History* (under 716): “The man of God Egbert converted the monks of Iona to the Catholic Easter and the canonical tonsure.” Bede *EH* V.24, in Sherley-Price, Latham, and Farmer, 328. In the *Greater Chronicle* (under *Anno Mundi* 4670 [AD 719]): “Egbert, a holy man of the nation of the Angles,...by his pious preaching brought back many provinces of the Scottish people to the canonical observation of Easter, in the year of our Lord’s Incarnation, 716.” Bede, *Chronicle*, in Giles, 293. The event is also included in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, presumably again because of the chronicler’s reliance on Bede’s summary. See *ASC*, in Swanton, 42-3.

monastic vows rather than study the arts of war.”⁴³ The Synod of Whitby, while a definite step in the right direction, paled in comparison to an event of such eschatological proportions. For Bede, the true climax of the Easter Controversy took place not in 664, but in 716, due not to the rhetoric of Wilfrid at Whitby, but to the careful work of Egbert in the community of Iona. With the success of the latter’s efforts, the mission of the Church was completed: the Gospel finally had reached the ends of the earth.⁴⁴

Admittedly, this explanation also has its weaknesses. A major challenge to one who questions Bede’s Roman leanings is a statement by the monk of Jarrow which unequivocally identifies “the Roman Church” as the “Catholic and Apostolic Church,” a declaration which seems to support Higham’s characterization of Bede as a papal sympathizer.⁴⁵ However, this evidence need not be damning: Caitlin Corning’s discussion of Columbanus’ work in Gaul suggests that he, too, as a representative of Celtic Christianity, “acknowledge[d] Rome’s place as a protector of orthodoxy,” which suggests that he shared with Bede the notion that the papacy and the apostolicity of the Church somehow intrinsically were connected.⁴⁶ Again, if to the monk of Jarrow the central danger of the Easter Controversy was to the unity of the faith, then it stands to reason that he would look to Rome, which stood as a shared point of reference between

⁴³ Bede *EH* V.23, in Sherley-Price, Latham, and Farmer, 324-5. See also Mic. 4:1-5.

⁴⁴ The apocalyptic sensibilities of Bede are not new in the context of British and Irish Christianity. Thomas O’Loughlin notes a similar tendency in the writings of Patrick, to see the missionary work done on the fringes of the known world as a fulfillment of the Great Commission given by Christ to the disciples in the Gospel of Matthew (28:18-20). See Thomas O’Loughlin, *Discovering Saint Patrick* (London: Darton, Longman, & Todd, 2005), 63-78; Thomas O’Loughlin, *Journeys on the Edges: The Celtic Tradition*, Traditions of Christian Spirituality, ed. Philip Sheldrake (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2000), 54-60.

⁴⁵ The historian noted that Oswy knew this, “although educated by the Irish.” Bede *EH* III.29, in Sherley-Price, Latham, and Farmer, 197.

⁴⁶ Corning, 34.

the supporters of both tables, as a rallying point around which both parties might gather in agreement. In any case, as Higham admits of his own conclusions, it is impossible to reach definitive positions on the strength of the available evidence.⁴⁷ Perhaps the true explanation for Bede's various treatments of the Whitby gathering is most appropriately assigned to a point somewhere between a sympathetic and an apathetic attitude toward Rome.

The suffering servant. In the *Life of Wilfrid*, the Synod of Whitby also is presented as a step in a process rather than as its culmination. However, in Eddius Stephanus' case this process has little to do with theology. The Easter Controversy, which is the heart and soul of Bede's treatment of the synodal proceedings of 664, seems to be of peripheral concern to Wilfrid's biographer. It is the portal by which his hero entered the ranks of the spiritual elite, rather than a problem to be dealt with on its own merits. Ultimately, the success of the Dionysian Easter in Northumbria falls in Stephanus not to the credit of Rome, but to the credit of Wilfrid, who argued in its defense. It serves in his biographer's scheme as a feather in the cap of a saint in desperate need of vindication in the face of his many enemies.

William Trent Foley detects in Stephanus' depiction of Wilfrid's stormy career a framework based upon the Pauline formula of glorification, expressed in the New Testament letter to the Romans (8:28-30).⁴⁸ It is the period which Foley identifies as that

⁴⁷ Higham, 100.

⁴⁸ "Those who doubt whether Stephen had this particular scheme explicitly in mind should note that he cites these verses from Romans in his first chapter, almost as if he were laying out a roadmap for what lay ahead." William Trent Foley, *Images of Sanctity in Eddius Stephanus' Life of Bishop Wilfrid, an Early English Saint's Life* (Lewiston, UK: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1992), 28. See also Eddius Stephanus *Life of Wilfrid* 1, in Webb and Farmer, 108.

of “justification” which most directly concerns the argument at hand. In this period, “Wilfrid undergoes a thrice-repeated cycle, each occurrence of which consists of two parts: persecution at the hands of a Northumbrian king and intervention by God through the authority of the apostolic see in Rome.”⁴⁹ The authority of Rome is, therefore, central to Stephanus’ argument, but for the most part it is an instrumental authority only, a dash of heavenly water after a sojourn in the furnace of tribulation.

At the same time, adherence to an orthodoxy established by the Roman Church plays a major role in revealing Wilfrid as a man both unjustly persecuted and deserving of greater respect. This use of Roman authority, though, appears to be as much for the saint’s sake as for the sake of papal supremacy. Foley argues that “[t]hroughout the justification section of the *Life...*, Wilfrid complains not so much about the violation of his person as about the violation of those *canones, mores, regulae, disciplina, normae*, and *ordines* which the apostolic authority in Rome has firmly established through its councils and traditions.”⁵⁰ In making this argument, he cites chapters 30, 46, and 51 of the *Life of Wilfrid*, in which the saint’s arguments admittedly focus upon English rejection of papal directives; meanwhile, he passes over chapter 47, in which Stephanus reconstructed Wilfrid’s great speech of self-defense at the Synod of Austerfield:

Why are you trying to bring me to so sad a plight as to have me make my own signature an instrument of self-destruction [asked Wilfrid]? I have been a bishop now for nearly forty years and though unworthy of that rank I am completely innocent of crime; yet you would have me drag down my own name and make it a scandal to all who hear it. After the death of those elders whom Pope Gregory sent to us, was I not the first to root out from the Church the foul weeds planted by the Scots? Did I not convert the whole Northumbrian nation to celebrating Easter at the proper time as the Holy See demanded, and to having the proper

⁴⁹ Foley, 34.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 50.

Roman tonsure in the form of a crown instead of your old way of shaving the back of the head from the top down? Did I not teach you to chant according to the practice of the early Church...? Did I not bring the monastic life into line with the Rule of St. Benedict never before introduced into these parts? And now, have I got to bring some hurried sentence against myself, unconscious though I am of any crime committed?⁵¹

This does not leave an impression of a man for whom the main source of irritation is not “the personal vendetta [the Northumbrian kings and bishops] have against him, but rather the audacity by which they embrace certain aspects of Rome’s apostolic authority and reject others.”⁵² A claim of selective obedience may well be a valid complaint against Wilfrid’s enemies, but it must be noted that those papal pronouncements which they chose to ignore generally in some vital way went against the saint’s own self-interest.⁵³

The career set in motion at Whitby in 664, and defined by repeated clashes with royal and religious alike, found its fulfillment in another synod held forty years later beside the River Nidd. After two hardship-riddled journeys to Rome and countless years in exile, Wilfrid’s fortunes, related Stephanus, were set right; with the blessing of Aelfled, daughter of Oswy, the mistreated bishop was restored to the headship of “the two best monasteries, Ripon and Hexham, with all their revenues.”⁵⁴ Foley places this

⁵¹ Eddius Stephanus *LW* 47, in Webb and Farmer, 157-8.

⁵² Foley, 50.

⁵³ Chapter 30 addresses the uncanonical consecration of bishops in Northumbria, three of whom happen to have been appointed to seats previously held by Wilfrid. “They succeeded in robbing me, planting themselves in my place and being consecrated as bishops,” he complained to Pope Agatho in 679. Chapter 46, while addressing Archbishop Theodore’s rejection of certain papal instructions, notes that “[t]he principal cause of dissension was of long standing, namely the unjust removal of land and possessions from the Church of St. Peter,” Wilfrid’s episcopal church at Ripon. Finally, the petition presented to Pope John in chapter 51 was written as a result of “recent disturbances in Britain caused by that faction which, in contravention of Pope Agatho’s decrees, have robbed me of my bishopric, monasteries, land, and everything I possessed.” Eddius Stephanus *LW* 30, 46, 51, in Webb and Farmer, 139, 155, 161. Foley admits the presence of this dynamic, but seems to ignore it in his conclusions. See Foley, 50.

⁵⁴ Eddius Stephanus *LW* 60, in Webb and Farmer, 176, 174-6.

episode in the saint's career in the "glorification" stage of Stephanus' Pauline framework, and Wilfrid's actions at Whitby are one of the chief jewels in his crown.⁵⁵ Wilfrid has gone through the fire of persecution, faced down the attacks of numerous enemies, and emerged relatively unscathed. It was not, in the *Life*, the correct observance of Easter or the biblical tonsure, or even the apostolic authority of Rome, but the reputation and position of Wilfrid which was truly at stake in Stephanus' Northumbria.

Stephanus, in the effort to prove his hero's mettle in the face of opposition, gives evidence of the continued presence in Northumbria itself, even after the departure of Colman, of those who retained an allegiance to the earlier Irish apostles. While Wilfrid was on the Continent awaiting ordination at the hands of Frankish bishops, "King Oswiu, moved to envy by our ancient foe, ignorantly let the see [of York, which had been promised to Wilfrid,] be snatched by a candidate of the Quartodeciman party, a highly irregular procedure and clean contrary to the mind of the Apostolic See."⁵⁶ Although in all likelihood both Wilfrid and his biographer recognized the technical inaccuracy of the Quartodeciman label in this context, this was for Stephanus a convenient obfuscation. "[I]t was exactly the heretical nature of the Irish and British," explains Caitlin Corning, "that highlighted and magnified Wilfrid's sacrifice and dedication in bringing the Church back into the Catholic fold."⁵⁷ All those, however, who wished to continue observing

⁵⁵ Foley, 37-40.

⁵⁶ This "Quartodeciman party" was also the reason Wilfrid was on the Continent in the first place: "[m]any English bishops," the saint remarked upon being recommended to the episcopacy, "are as much Quartodecimans as the Celts themselves....In all humility, therefore, let me beg you to send me, under your protection, across the sea to Gaul, where there are many bishops of recognized orthodoxy. There, though unworthy, I can be consecrated without the Holy See raising any objections." Eddius Stephanus *LW* 14, 12, in Webb and Farmer, 122, 120.

⁵⁷ Corning, 120, 118. See also Webb and Farmer, 120n1; Bertram Colgrave, trans., notes to *The Life of Bishop Wilfrid by Eddius Stephanus* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1927), 159.

Easter according to the Celtic-84 calculation (whose willingness to celebrate the festival on *luna* 14 if this happened to fall on a Sunday led initially to accusations of Quartodecimanism) had, according to Bede, returned with Colman to Ireland.⁵⁸ Stephanus' continued use of the epithet, then, was both technically incorrect and anachronistic unless, as Corning suggests, the meaning of the term had been expanded beyond its original referent. In this new application, she suggests, Stephanus' use of the title "most likely refers to those who adopted Roman practices but refused to condemn Aidan and Lindisfarne's heritage."⁵⁹

Chad, the cleric appointed to Wilfrid's promised see of York during that saint's absence, serves in his role in the *Life* to elucidate the implications of Stephanus' new use of the Quartodeciman label. Bede informed his readers that Chad (along with his brother Cedd, who served as interpreter at the Synod of Whitby) had been trained at Lindisfarne. He apparently carried out his episcopal duties according to the traditions he had learned in the Celtic community: the monk of Jarrow revealed that "[t]he most reverend Bishop Chad always preferred to undertake his preaching missions on foot rather than on horseback," a quality which Bede originally ascribed to Northumbria's first Irish bishop, Aidan.⁶⁰ Upon Wilfrid's return to Britain, wrote Stephanus, and Archbishop Theodore having been informed "how canon law had been flouted, one bishop, like a thief, grabbing another's diocese," Chad was removed from the bishopric of York and it was

⁵⁸ "Colman, seeing his teachings rejected and his following discounted, took away with him all who wished to follow him, that is, all who still dissented from the Catholic Easter and tonsure—for there was no small argument about this as well—and returned to the land of the Irish in order to consult his compatriots on their future course of action." Bede *EH* III.26, in Sherley-Price, Latham, and Farmer, 192.

⁵⁹ Corning, 138.

⁶⁰ Bede *EH* III.23, IV.3, III.5, in Sherley-Price, Latham, and Farmer, 182, 206, 150.

returned to its rightful holder. In this process, noted Wilfrid's biographer, Chad proved to be "an extremely meek man and a true servant of God"; recognizing his wrongdoing in allowing "those Quartodecimans" to place him in another man's rightful seat, he "humbly confessed his fault, accepted the judgement of the bishops, and did penance." This was enough, apparently, to exonerate the Irish-trained cleric in Stephanus' eyes. He described Chad's subsequent appointment to the see of Mercia at Lichfield, where "[h]e lived a holy life rich in good works and, in due course, went to his fathers, to await the coming of the Lord in that judgement which, for him, ought to be extremely lenient."⁶¹

Wilfrid's encounter with Chad illustrates two key points. First, it suggests that the fault into which those fell who continued to esteem the Irish fathers of English Christianity, at least in the mind of Stephanus, had as much to do with their lack of respect for and deference to his hero, Wilfrid, as it did with any considerations of doctrine or authority. Once Chad, who presumably already had accepted the Dionysian Easter, had proven himself willing to make way for Wilfrid, Stephanus promoted him from the ranks of Quartodecimanism back into the light of orthodoxy, post haste. More importantly, however, Chad's case demonstrates that there were, in the years following the Synod of Whitby, a number of churchmen of the Celtic tradition who, having accepted the Easter and tonsure innovations prescribed at the synod, continued to work side by side with churchmen of a more "Roman" frame of mind. Once again, the evidence shows that the Synod of Whitby did not kill Celtic Christianity, even in the Northumbrian territories which, supposedly, it had vacated with the departure of Colman. From Bede, it is evident that the gathering in 664 was not the climax of the Easter

⁶¹ Eddius Stephanus *LW* 15, in Webb and Farmer, 123. Bede provides a similar assessment of Chad's character and work, in Bede *EH* IV.3, in Sherley-Price, Latham, and Farmer, 206-11.

Controversy; neither, as one discovers in Stephanus, did it signify the death of a tradition. Instead, the Northumbrian Church in the years following Whitby was manned by clerics of both Irish and Roman backgrounds, working together in cooperation.⁶²

A Shared Tradition

One cannot, however, argue that the Synod of Whitby was a paradigm-shifting moment in the Northumbrian Church, “creating [a system] which combined the strengths of each tradition...in obedience to Rome.”⁶³ It is more appropriate to understand the Celtic and Roman strains of Christianity as coeval, coexistent, and cooperative in the British Isles, beginning with the mission of Patrick in the mid-fifth century. Thomas O’Loughlin reminds the reader that “the theology of early medieval Europe has to be seen not as a continental monolith with a distinctive Celtic rock lying off to one side, but as a patchwork of local theologies which influence[d] one another for good or ill.”⁶⁴ It is both independence and interconnectedness which, in O’Loughlin’s estimation, should capture the student’s imagination:

Both Spain and Italy seem distant from the dioceses and monasteries in Frankish lands that we meet in the course of Columbanus’ life...; and all seem different to the Ireland of St Columba’s time...and the England upon which St Augustine of Canterbury landed....Yet, all these people are linked one with another. Isidore [of Seville] used Gregory’s works, Columbanus wrote to him, the monasticism of Columba and Columbanus was formed from the same Gaulish materials—mainly

⁶² “Ironically, the apparent friction between Wilfrid and the moderate party meant that the alternative Celtic practices continued to be a relevant issue long after there was any portion of the Northumbrian Church that actually supported them. If Wilfrid and his followers had not remained a political consideration or if the Wilfridian circle had not promoted their part in bringing Roman orthodoxy to Northumbria, it is doubtful whether the Celtic heritage of Lindisfarne would have remained much of an issue after 664.” Corning, 140.

⁶³ Higham, 195.

⁶⁴ Thomas O’Loughlin, *Celtic Theology: Humanity, World and God in Early Irish Writings* (London: Continuum, 2000), 23.

Cassian—that produced the Frankish monasteries and which influenced the *Rule* [of Benedict of Nursia] Gregory championed, and within a few years the works of Gregory were being read on Iona and those of Isidore were its basic textbooks. To say that all these expressions of Christianity were merely one, ‘western,’ ‘Latin Catholicism’ blinds us to the rich diversity of texture; to split them up into ‘churches’ dismisses the abundant links and their own perception of unity in Christ. Reality is more complex than either the ‘clumpers’ or the ‘splitters’ would have it.⁶⁵

A true appreciation of the Celtic contribution to early medieval Christianity, then, requires recognition of both the differences and the similarities between the faith and practice of the Isles and those of the broader Church.⁶⁶ The remainder of this chapter will focus upon the latter.

Before proceeding, however, a word must be spoken on the difference between reality and rhetoric in the context of the Easter Controversy. The tendency in this conflict toward specious exaggeration has already been seen in Eddius Stephanus’ profligate use of the Quartodeciman label to describe Wilfrid’s many opponents. Much of the heatedness of language evidenced in the Easter Controversy stemmed, as Caitlin Corning explains, from the gravity of the issue at hand in the minds of the churchmen involved. The problem of correct Easter calculation, as shallow and tedious as it may appear to the modern observer, carried with it questions which threatened key Christian concepts, from the person of Jesus Christ to the efficacy of salvation.⁶⁷ It held a philosophical knife to the throat not only of church unity, but of Christian identity itself. The seriousness of the

⁶⁵ O’Loughlin, *Celtic Theology*, 23.

⁶⁶ The tendency in many recent works on Celtic Christianity, notes O’Loughlin, is to focus exclusively on the differences between Celtic Christians and their contemporaries: “[t]he exceptional becomes the guarantee of ecclesial distinctiveness, and after many generations of noting what was exceptional an impression was formed among the general public that the ‘Celtic’ and continental Churches were as chalk and cheese.” *Ibid.*, 18.

⁶⁷ Corning, 9-11.

situation, and the reactions of those involved, tend to exalt distinction at the expense of likeness, and it is very easy for the student to become a partisan. If community is to be discerned through the conceptual shell of conflict, it is necessary to dismiss momentarily the Synod of Whitby and focus on the characters and contributions of the Celtic Christian world in their own contexts and on their own merits.

Such a dismissal allows one more clearly to understand the nature of the changes that occurred in post-Whitby Northumbria. The adoption of a new Easter was, for a Church already well in tune with the broader strains of Christendom, not so monumental a decision. O'Loughlin suggests that, as seekers of the "theological ideal that the truth was 'what was held always, everywhere, by everyone,'" the leaders of the Celtic Christians "would have been the first to adapt their ideas to that of the larger group."⁶⁸ If he is correct in his assessment of the insular mentality, then further support is given to the idea that the major difference between pre- and post-Whitby Northumbria was not in the relationship between the Celtic and Roman traditions, but between the English state and the papacy. Setting aside the animosity inspired by the Easter debate, then, also allows one better to assess the true effect of the synod in 664.

The Church on the Edge of Forever

Even the most popular of histories recognizes in Patrick a certain preference for "Roman" methodology. Robert Van de Weyer, like many others, identified Patrick as the Father of Celtic Christianity; "[y]et," he wrote, "he is an ambivalent figure." As a missionary, "he was deeply influenced by Roman attitudes and ideas. So in Ireland he tried to organise the church on Roman lines, with powerful bishops in grand cathedrals,

⁶⁸ O'Loughlin, *Celtic Theology*, 17.

enforcing strict moral and spiritual discipline.”⁶⁹ George Hunter, while crediting the apostle to the Irish with the first truly “indigenized” Christian mission, also saw in him evidence of *Romanitas*: “Patrick emphasized, however, the planting of traditional parish churches, each with a priest, with groups of churches administered by a bishop, which followed the established Roman way of ‘doing church.’”⁷⁰ Even Thomas Cahill, author of the immensely popular *How the Irish Saved Civilization* (1995), noted that Patrick’s “practice of associating bishoprics with local kingships” undoubtedly stemmed from his connections with the Continent.⁷¹ In many of these formulations, it was the generations following Patrick who, building upon his foundation, completed the process of radicalizing the Celtic faith and separating it from its continental counterpart.⁷² The first steps down this path, however, are in popular literature assigned almost universally to Patrick.⁷³

If, noted R.P.C. Hanson, Patrick did indeed begin a process of removal from a strictly universal faith, it was simply because of the social context in which he lived. “He certainly regarded the bishop of Rome as the leading bishop of the Western church and as on occasion entitled to exercise authority...over that church. But the bishop of Rome was

⁶⁹ Robert Van de Weyer, ed., introduction to *Celtic Fire: The Passionate Religious Vision of Ancient Britain and Ireland* (New York: Doubleday, 1990), 10.

⁷⁰ Hunter, 27.

⁷¹ Thomas Cahill, *How the Irish Saved Civilization: The Untold Story of Ireland’s Heroic Role from the Fall of Rome to the Rise of Medieval Europe* (New York: Nan A. Talese/Doubleday, 1995), 110.

⁷² Van de Weyer, 10-11; Hunter, 27.

⁷³ Cahill ascribes to Patrick “the first de-Romanized Christianity in human history, a Christianity without the sociopolitical baggage of the Greco-Roman world, a Christianity that completely inculturated itself into the Irish scene.” Cahill, 148.

remote and difficult to communicate with.”⁷⁴ In this respect, Patrick’s experience was no different from the experiences of countless churchmen of the period; many were separated by great distances from the major hierarchical centers of European Christianity, and the difficulties of long-distance travel were daunting at best. Eddius Stephanus, in recounting the several journeys of Wilfrid between Britain, Gaul, and Rome, describes the saint’s survival of shipwreck, piracy, and serious illness; Bede, writing of the interventions by St. Germanus of Auxerre in the Pelagian controversies of the fifth century, told of a violent storm raised by “the hostile power of devils,” in the course of which Germanus’ ship’s “sails were torn to shreds by the gale, the skill of the sailors was defeated, and the safety of the ship depended on prayer rather than on seamanship”; the abbot Ceolfrith of Wearmouth-Jarrow, making his way toward Rome where he planned to end his days, due to his age and the length of the journey fell ill and died before reaching his destination.⁷⁵ Under these dangerous conditions, a measure of idiosyncrasy in the ministries of isolated individuals, from the northern Isles to Visigothic Spain, was to be expected; “[t]hroughout the Christian world,” notes Peter Brown, “Christian churches had become profoundly regionalized....Each region needed to feel that it possessed, if in diminished form, the essence of an entire Christian culture. Such a need was sharply felt in the British Isles, but it was by no means limited to it.”⁷⁶ In whatever distinctiveness he may have demonstrated, then, Patrick was far from unique.

⁷⁴ R.P.C. Hanson, “The Mission of Saint Patrick,” in James P. Mackey, ed., *An Introduction to Celtic Christianity* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1989), 38.

⁷⁵ Eddius Stephanus *LW* 13, 56, in Webb and Farmer, 120-2, 170-1; Bede *EHI* 17, in Sherley-Price, Latham, and Farmer, 65-6; Bede, *Lives of the Abbots of Wearmouth and Jarrow* 21, in Webb and Farmer, 208-9; *The Anonymous History of Abbot Ceolfrith* 21-36, in Webb and Farmer, 220-7.

⁷⁶ “The movements of a few distinguished travellers, such as Benedict Biscop and Wilfrid, gained their significance precisely from the fact that they had rarity value. Such figures stood out as the bearers of

In most ways, wrote Hanson, Patrick's ministry in Ireland fell into categories common to the episcopate of his day:

In other respects Patrick acts as a normal fifth-century bishop might be expected to act. He converts and baptises a vast number of people....This baptism included both confirmation and admission to Holy Communion. He ordains clergy, some of whom serve on his staff....He certainly built some churches, no doubt of wood, because he refers to pious women throwing gifts on the altar.⁷⁷

These activities, presumably, are those which have been identified by many popular historians as belonging to a "Roman" methodology, and yet, according to Hanson, this is not their immediate source. Although the Irish annals place Patrick's mission under the aegis of the same pope, Celestine I, who had commissioned Palladius his predecessor, his true base was neither in Rome nor on the Continent, but in the British Church in which he was raised. "Patrick," Hanson wrote, "was sent and supplied by the British church, and during the whole of his career held himself responsible to that church."⁷⁸ If Hanson is correct in identifying the British Church as the sole sending agency behind Patrick's mission, then the "Roman" methodology discerned by so many in his actions actually must be considered a set of practices shared between the British Church and the rest of Western Europe, and this some twenty years after the Roman troops withdrew and supposedly left the former to its own devices. Thomas Charles-Edwards also suggests a greater degree of continuity than many have assumed between the traditions of the post-Roman British Church and its earlier counterpart, evidence of which he discerns in

exotic goods and of foreign knowledge to regions locked in the cultural and religious equivalent of a 'subsistence economy.'" Brown, 364.

⁷⁷ Hanson, 39.

⁷⁸ Ibid., 29, 29-30. See also John O'Donovan, trans. and ed., *Annala Riogachta Eireann: Annals of the Kingdom of Ireland, by the Four Masters, from the Earliest Period to the Year 1616*, vol. 1, 2nd ed. (Dublin: Hodges, Smith, & Co., 1856), 132.

Patrick's writing style, the rusticity of which may be misleading. In that church he had received enough training, proposes Charles-Edwards, consciously to adopt a Latin intended specifically to communicate a biblical message.⁷⁹

Most important, however, to a determination of Patrick's sense of the universality of his faith is an understanding of his own conception of his ministry, which was highly eschatological in nature. In his pseudo-autobiographical defense of his work among the Irish, Patrick exclaimed:

So may it never happen to me that my God should separate me from his 'people which he has acquired' in the outermost parts of the earth. I pray God that he give me perseverance and deign to grant that I should render him faithful witness until...my passing..., all for the sake of my God.⁸⁰

In this, and in many similar references throughout the *Confessio*, Patrick evinced “a belief that he was the eschatological apostle—when he finished his allotted task, then the End could come.” While to modern observers familiar with the apocalyptic rantings of religious fanatics this may seem a rather arrogant (or imbalanced) self-conception, “[Patrick's] sense of his task was not that of a psychologically disturbed person, but a simple deduction from the facts of history and geography known to him.” He stood at the edge of the inhabited world, “in the last nation to hear the gospel,...and so he saw himself as the last apostle.”⁸¹ This is an aspect of Patrick's thought which has been recognized

⁷⁹ Charles-Edwards, 230-3.

⁸⁰ Patrick *Confessio* 58, in O'Loughlin, *Discovering Saint Patrick*, 169.

⁸¹ O'Loughlin, *Journeys on the Edges*, 56, 57, 55. Patrick's belief here is based upon a very literal exegesis of the Great Commission, in Matt. 28:18-20, and on Matt. 24:14, in which Jesus promised that “this gospel of the kingdom shall be preached in all the world for a witness unto all nations, and then shall the end come.” Matt. 24:14, KJV (King James Version). This is an interpretation of scripture common to missionary efforts on “the edge of the world.” A similar emphasis can be found in the writings of many theologians who took part in the English Puritans' seventeenth-century migration to the New World.

by a multitude of scholars: “as Christ’s own apostles had begun to extend the Christian Faith beyond Palestine, so he, in a westward direction, had completed that movement.”⁸²

The Patrick of popular literature is a highly complex character. He is presented as straddling the line between two traditions, at times leaning more in one direction, at times in the other. As explained above, however, he was not in this as unique as many have supposed; many churchmen of the period were torn between a desire to communicate more closely with the universal church and an inability to fulfill their wishes. This conflict stemmed not from separatist tendencies, but from their sense of belonging to something greater than themselves. Patrick’s self-awareness as the (literal) ultimate apostle underlines this sense of connection; he went to Ireland not to begin a new work, but to see the fulfillment of an old one, and it is in this context that his contribution to Celtic Christianity is best understood.

Defender of the Faith

In the fifth century, Patrick saw himself as fulfilling the Great Commission at the edge of the world; at the end of the sixth, Columbanus left the world’s edge to defend the gospel message in the heart of it. He “regarded himself,” notes Michael Richter, “as a champion of orthodoxy,” and it was in this capacity that the monk of Bangor carried out much of his work on the Continent, both in Gaul and in Italy.⁸³ The previous chapter dealt with Columbanus’ involvement in the Easter Controversy: he was responsible both

⁸² “He, a successor of the apostles, had taken the Faith to the uttermost western limits of the inhabited world beyond which no man lived.” Charles-Edwards, 215. “Patrick was convinced that his own journeying as a herald of the Gospel had taken him to this far borderland of the world.” Noel Dermot O’Donoghue, *Aristocracy of Soul: Patrick of Ireland, The Way of the Christian Mystics 1* (Wilmington, DE: Michael Glazier, 1987), 75-6.

⁸³ Michael Richter, *Bobbio in the Early Middle Ages: The Abiding Legacy of Columbanus* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2008), 26.

for its outbreak and for the inclusion of the papacy in the related debate. However, this was not the only controversy in which he took part.

Shortly after his arrival in Lombard Italy, Columbanus plunged headfirst into the highly murky waters of the Three Chapters controversy. This conflict, stemming from the Chalcedonian Definition (451) of the person of Christ, was already over a century old by the time the Irishman took up his pen on the subject, and had become so confused as to defy simple definition.⁸⁴ In 613, he wrote once again to a pope (in this case, Boniface IV) to address “a theological and political tangle which had proved too difficult for Gregory the Great to resolve,” and which would also “prove too difficult for Columbanus.”⁸⁵ As in the matter of Easter, the Irishman wrote in the interests of Christian unity: Italy was divided between three Christian groups—the Arians, the Aquileians, and the Romans—and this situation was in desperate need of resolution.⁸⁶ Columbanus’ letter apparently was written in response to rumors that the papacy had drifted in its support of the orthodox opinion (whatever this may have been); it is proof again to Caitlin Corning that Columbanus viewed the papacy as a defender of doctrine in the Church as a whole. “As the source from which the streams of true doctrine flow through all the traditions in the West [Columbanus chastised the pope], he must repent

⁸⁴ “As the years passed,” note Robert Markus and Claire Sotinel, “and the wound of the schism healed, the controversy became more and more difficult to understand for the protagonists themselves.” Robert Markus and Claire Sotinel, “Epilogue,” in Celia Chazelle and Catherine Cubitt, eds., *The Crisis of the Oikoumene: The Three Chapters and the Failed Quest for Unity in the Sixth-Century Mediterranean*, Studies in the Early Middle Ages, ed. Elizabeth M. Tyler, Julian D. Richards, and Ross Balzaretto (Turnhout, Belg.: Brepols Publishers, 2007), 277.

⁸⁵ Charles-Edwards, 374.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 372.

and promote correct teaching for fear that all churches be sullied.”⁸⁷ Charles-Edwards notes that in this situation not only did the Irishman call the papacy on the carpet, he also set himself up as Rome’s defender: “in this way Columbanus ranged himself firmly on the side of Rome, while also claiming the right to offer blunt criticism.”⁸⁸

While he was thus combating the problem of the Three Chapters, the Irishman also found himself confronting the vestiges of Arianism in Lombardy. Agilulf, the Lombard ruler who granted the ancient church of Bobbio to the Columbanian community, had at one time been of an Arian persuasion, but upon marrying Theudelinda of Bavaria, herself a Catholic, he had apparently switched allegiances. “It would appear,” suggests Michael Richter, “that Agilulf received [the Irishman]...primarily as a preacher of orthodoxy in his kingdom.”⁸⁹ Again in this situation Columbanus sides himself with the universal Church, and with Rome, its champion of orthodoxy, against the ranks of the heterodox few.

One further point is worthy of address. Columbanus, in his monastic role, stands in stark denial of claims which oppose the leniency of Celtic monasticism to the hard-nosed authoritarianism of the Benedictine *Rule*. His own *Rule* was one of the most demanding ever produced in Western Europe. In it he recommended extreme asceticism, both physical and spiritual:

Let the monk live in a monastery under the direction of a single father, in the company of many, so that he may learn humility from one, and patience from

⁸⁷ Corning, 33. Ian Wood notes that Columbanus’ conception both of the problem and its appropriate solution are unclear in his letter to the pope: it is difficult to determine which opinion (the Nestorian or the Monophysite) presented a greater danger to the Church. Ian Wood, “The Franks and Papal Theology, 550-660,” in Chazelle and Cubitt, 238-9.

⁸⁸ Charles-Edwards, 377.

⁸⁹ Richter, 27, 26-8, 34.

another. One may teach him silence and another gentleness. Let him not do as he wishes, let him eat what he is told to eat, let him keep what he has received, let him carry out his duties and be obedient to someone he would not have chosen. Let him come tired to his bed and sleep while he is still walking, and let him be made to rise before he has slept enough. Let him be silent when he suffers wrong, let him fear the superior of the monastery as a lord, and love him as a father, believing that whatever he commands is for his own good. Let him not pass judgment on the opinion of an elder; his duty is to obey and carry out what he is commanded to do.⁹⁰

This is hardly a regimen characterized by “a high degree of freedom,” or representative of a “way of life [that] remained simple and flexible.”⁹¹ Indeed, in some ways Benedict’s *Rule* made more allowances for human frailty than did Columbanus’; he instructed abbots to deal gently with those who stumbled under the monastic load, “[f]or [the abbot] should know that he has undertaken the care of weak souls, not the tyranny over the strong.”⁹²

The monk of Bangor was by no means a man outside the universal Church. He knew, as well as anyone, the doctrinal issues being debated in the wider Christian world, and he was willing not only to involve himself in them for the sake of Christian unity, but also to side with Rome as the champion of that union. Finally, in his monastic thought he was clearly not at odds with the greater stream of Western spirituality, but right at the heart of it. As the best available example of Celtic Christianity as expressed in a continental context, Columbanus demonstrates not an alienation from his “Latin” contemporaries, but a strong identification with them.

⁹⁰ Columbanus *Rule* 10, in Oliver Davies, *Celtic Spirituality*, The Classics of Western Spirituality 96, ed. Bernard McGinn (New York: Paulist Press, 1999), 256.

⁹¹ Van de Weyer, 13, 12-13.

⁹² Benedict of Nursia *Rule* XXVII, in Henry Bettenson and Chris Maunder, eds., *Documents of the Christian Church*, 3rd ed. (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1999), 131.

Medicine for the Soul

Some may argue that neither Patrick nor Columbanus are probative cases of the relationship between Celtic Christianity and the rest of the Church, since the former carried out his ministry before the “true” Celtic Church developed (which means he may be seen as less than a full-fledged member of that church) and the latter carried out his work beyond the “Celtic Fringe” (which means his thought may have been corrupted by that current on the Continent, and he too must be seen as not fully “Celtic” in his approach to Christianity). It becomes necessary, then, to refocus the lens of study both chronologically and geographically—to look beyond Patrick’s time and Columbanus’ horizon. The development in Ireland of the penitentials offers a fair assessment from this perspective.

“While the Catholics despised all things Celtic,” argues Robert Van de Weyer, “the Celts were happy to learn from Catholic theology and practise, even sending young men to Europe to study under the great Catholic teachers.”⁹³ Van de Weyer’s interpretation in this case, as in others, is intensely misguided; the path from the British Isles to Rome was a two-way street, and it is possible that more people traveled northward than southward. Agilbert, the Gallic bishop who attended the Synod of Whitby in 664, previously had spent several years “studying the scriptures in Ireland.”⁹⁴ The Emerald Isle was not, during the early medieval period, the isolated backwater that its geographical location might suggest, and as many (if not more) industrious pupils journeyed to its shores to study as traveled away from them.

⁹³ Van de Weyer, 21.

⁹⁴ Bede *EH* III.7, in Sherley-Price, Latham, and Farmer, 154.

The penitential system which emerged in Ireland in its completed form near the end of the sixth century, in the *Penitential of Finnian*, is one instance of a practice which the broader Christian Church willingly received from its insular brethren. While it cannot feasibly be argued that the penitentials, with their emphasis on private penance, completely supplanted a system of public penance in exclusive use on the Continent, it does appear that “the creation of highly structured penitentials with penances listed by the frequency of the sin, gender, age, and rank was a distinctly ‘Celtic’ practice that spread to the rest of the Church.”⁹⁵ “They provide,” notes Thomas O’Loughlin, “the one case where Irish and Welsh clergy were highly innovative, and actually shaped western Christian practice and theology.”⁹⁶ Available data shows that penitentials were in use in Gaul by the end of the sixth century, in Italy by the end of the eighth, and in Visigothic Spain by the beginning of the ninth century. Although they were not always an uncontroversial feature of medieval Christianity, surviving anathematization by various church councils and synods, these documents remained an integral part of the Christian experience up to the Reformation and beyond; one of the latest pieces of penitential literature on record is an abridgement to a late sixteenth-century Milanese document, made around the turn of the eighteenth century.⁹⁷

Columbanus served as the vehicle by which the penitential system arrived on the continent, but in this as in the case of the Celtic-84 Easter table (which Daniel McCarthy

⁹⁵ Corning, 16.

⁹⁶ O’Loughlin, *Celtic Theology*, 49.

⁹⁷ John T. McNeill and Helena M. Gamer, eds., introduction to *Medieval Handbooks of Penance: A Translation of the Principal Libri Poenitentiales*, reprint ed., Records of Western Civilization, ed. Robert Somerville (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990), 26-7. See also 363-8.

concludes was developed originally in Gaul), his offices worked to complete a circle.⁹⁸

In this respect the penitentials demonstrate the high degree of symbiosis which characterized the western Church of the early Middle Ages. Thomas O’Loughlin lists three major factors in the development in Ireland of the penitentials, two of which may be attributed to the island’s contact with the rest of the world. First, one must turn to the works of John Cassian, one of the main contributors to Western monasticism: in his studies of sin “as...part of the ongoing life of the monk,” he adopted a view of penance which approximated the physician’s understanding of disease. Rather than being punished, sin as a weakness of the spiritual physique “had to be examined and removed as an ailment.”⁹⁹ Cassian’s thought on sin altered the medieval understanding of penance in important ways:

First, it was not punishment but medicine: penance was to make good damage done and so was a reparation and repayment rather than the cost of being saved after disaster. Second, there was a new emphasis on the individual, since sin was a sickness needing diagnosis rather than a crime needing prosecution. This put a value on spiritual self-knowledge in place of the need for public declaration within the Church; equally the one who announced the nature of sins was not necessarily the bishop acting as a judge in the forum, but rather the one who had the care of the souls of the monks, and his decisions were those of physician or trainer with the patient or trainee. Third, since it was designed to deal with the range of sins that afflicted the monk’s life it was by nature a sliding scale capable of dealing with minor as well as major diseases, and so it was an ongoing life-long process.¹⁰⁰

Cassian’s proposal of an ongoing process to deal with ongoing sin offered an alternative to what O’Loughlin calls the “once-off” system of public penance, which in

⁹⁸ Brown, 252, 256-7. See also Daniel McCarthy, “The Origin of the *Latercus* Paschal Cycle of the Insular Celtic Churches,” *Cambrian Medieval Celtic Studies* 28 (winter 1994): 25-49.

⁹⁹ O’Loughlin, *Celtic Theology*, 54, 53-4. Cassian’s greatest contributions to Western monasticism were his *Institutions of the Monastic Life* (420) and his *Conferences* (426), which played a major role in making the lives of the Desert Fathers of Egypt accessible to the West. See Brown, 111.

¹⁰⁰ O’Loughlin, *Celtic Theology*, 54.

fifth-century Western Europe was the governing principle of spiritual reconciliation.¹⁰¹ Combined with the Greek concept of “the baptism of tears,” O’Loughlin’s second external factor—which held that it was not the outward but the inward person, conditioned by “contrition, compunction, and tearfulness,” who mattered most in the process of divine forgiveness—the penitentials helped bring about the privatization of penance.¹⁰² The focus of the conciliatory process shifted from the relationship between the person and society, to that between the person and God, the solution for which need not be reached in a public forum. It was this new flexibility, which many used to the old system viewed as laxity, which brought the penitentials under frequent fire from ecclesiastical councils. They tended toward “the notion of sinfulness as a list of ‘black marks’ that could be bought off by a mechanistic application of spiritual payments.”¹⁰³ Even so, the penitentials’ staying power demonstrates the extent to which they eventually replaced the older systems of penance on the Continent: especially in the importance they placed upon personal contrition, “the penitentials are the harbingers of all later theologies of penance in the west.”¹⁰⁴

O’Loughlin’s third major factor in the development of the insular penitentials—Old Irish law—offers an explanation for the particularity of this practice to the Irish

¹⁰¹ O’Loughlin, *Celtic Theology*, 49-51. Caesarius, bishop of Arles during the first half of the sixth century, was the first Western churchman to allow for “the iteration of penance,” and even then only in a limited fashion. McNeill and Gamer, 14.

¹⁰² Gregory of Nazianzen, in particular, developed the concept of the “baptism of tears.” O’Loughlin, *Celtic Theology*, 54-5.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, 65. See also McNeill and Gamer, 27.

¹⁰⁴ O’Loughlin, *Celtic Theology*, 66. Caitlin Corning warns against the temptation to envision too linear a process in the replacement of the old system by the new. Instead, she notes, “[m]ost churches used a variety of penitential practices depending upon the situation.” Corning, 16.

Church.¹⁰⁵ The secular law of Ireland prescribed its penalties on the basis of financial status, social rank, gravity of offence, and criminal persistence.¹⁰⁶ A similar set of penal criteria may be seen in the standard penitential text. In the *Penitential of Finnian*, a cleric who lusts once after a certain woman is sentenced to seven days on bread and water; the same cleric, if his covetousness becomes chronic, must extend that sentence to forty days. If a member of the clergy confesses to having plotted against his neighbor's life, he must for an entire year abstain from wine and meat, during six months of which time he must limit himself to bread and water; on the other hand, if a layman commits the same sin, he is sentenced only to a week, "since he is a man of this world and his guilt is lighter in this world and his reward less in the world to come."¹⁰⁷ In the *Irish Canons*, fourteen years are prescribed as the penance for parricide, while only seven years are commanded for a regular homicide.¹⁰⁸ According to the *Collectio canonum Hibernensis*, if theft is committed in a church, the thief must pay restitution in kind; if, however, that church is the resting place of a saint or a martyr, the person responsible had the choice between the loss of a hand or foot, a stint in prison, or exile.¹⁰⁹ The obvious similarities between the gradations in the penitentials and those in Irish law suggest that fifth-century Ireland offered ideal conditions for the development and refinement of medieval penitential literature, conditions not present elsewhere in early medieval Europe.¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁵ O'Loughlin, *Celtic Theology*, 55.

¹⁰⁶ Corning, 16; Charles-Edwards, 124-44.

¹⁰⁷ *The Penitential of Finnian* 16, 17, 6, 7, in McNeill and Gamer, 90, 88.

¹⁰⁸ *The Irish Canons* I.1-2, in McNeill and Gamer, 118.

¹⁰⁹ *Collectio canonum Hibernensis* XXIX.6, 7, in McNeill and Gamer, 140-1.

¹¹⁰ O'Loughlin, *Celtic Theology*, 55-6.

Furthermore, the complexity of these calculations supports the contention of Rowan Williams, that it is impossible to devote any amount of time to the penitential thought of the insular Church without recognizing the inherent legalism of that system.¹¹¹ The penitentials, therefore, represent one more way in which Celtic Christianity may not be excised from the wider context of early medieval Christianity, while at the same time showcasing a unique characteristic of the Irish Church within a universal faith. Their close ties to Cassian's works, produced after the Roman withdrawal from Britain, and their affinity to Eastern theological constructs, are proof of a Church that looked outward as much as inward for its inspiration, and which never was immersed in total isolation. Also, the eagerness with which the continental Church incorporated penitential methodology denies any comprehensive antipathy in the balance of Western Europe toward Celtic innovation. The evidence suggests that neither the English Channel nor the Irish Sea were ever the impregnable barriers that the Celtic Christian myth imagines, but that they were instead quite as navigable (and quite as navigated) then as they are now.

Conclusion

In the ideological war for Celtic Christianity, writes Ian Bradley, “[t]he significance of the Synod of Whitby has undoubtedly been over-exaggerated and the position of the losing side over-romanticised.”¹¹² The gathering in 664 did not spell the end of the Celtic tradition; from evidence both historical and literary, its involvement in Northumbrian ecclesiastical affairs, embodied in churchmen like Chad, continued to

¹¹¹ Rowan Williams, *Why Study the Past?: The Quest for the Historical Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2005), 103.

¹¹² Bradley, 25.

flourish in the years following the synod. Moreover, the Easter Controversy, supposedly resolved at Whitby, in reality extended well beyond 664 and was not finally decided until over a century later. The Celtic tradition, therefore, in both its particularity and its conventionality, survived its apparent demise quite intact.

The cooperation between the Celtic and Roman churchmen within the Northumbrian Church, was not, however, a phenomenon created by the gathering in 664. In the lives and ministries of men like Patrick and Columbanus, the student of Celtic Christianity finds incontrovertible evidence of an ongoing relationship between Christian activity in the northern isles and in the rest of the Christian world, at times more heavily emphasized than at others, but present always. The evidence of idiosyncratic Irish practices does not run contrary to this conclusion; as demonstrated, a world defined by distance rather than proximity was naturally full of such differences. Celtic Christianity's uniqueness was, quite simply, not so unique.

Also, the Celtic contribution of the penitentials to universal praxis underlines the pervasive element of symbiosis which characterized the early medieval Church. Having received the concept, through Cassian, from the Eastern portion of the Christian world, the Celtic culture digested it, merged it with its own distinctive system of secular law, and offered it back to the wider Christian world in a revolutionary format which was readily incorporated into the usages of the Church as a whole. This one example both demonstrates the extent to which the insular Church was affected by the wider world, and refutes any suggestion of inherent apathy—or outright enmity—between that Church and its continental counterpart.

Some may suggest that this sense of *koinonia* between the insular and continental Churches came to an abrupt end at the Synod of Whitby, and as proof of this altered relationship they may point to the chaotic estate into which ecclesiastical affairs had degenerated within twenty years of Oswy's synod. This seems to be proof of Roman meddling, and solidifies the popular image of the Roman as a Church governed by force rather than faith, infighting rather than inspiration, and spite rather than spirituality. It was, however, not the Church of Rome, but its representative in Northumbria, who occasioned much of this strife. Wilfrid, in his personality and in his more substantial conception of the role of the bishop, not only within but outside the church as well, became a lightning rod for conflict in the years after 664. While he did clash also with his fellow Northumbrian clerics, it was his fractious relationship with the ruling house which truly defined the changes which took place in the post-Whitby Northumbrian Church.

CHAPTER FOUR

The Northumbrian State and the Church

“The eighth-century Irish church,” wrote Kathleen Hughes in 1981, “inherited its theology and learning from the Roman Christian world, but in organization it was a native church.”¹ She is referring here to certain structural differences in church government which grew up over time in Ireland into a bifurcated system of abbatial and episcopal authority, varying from location to location. Each carried with it a unique understanding of the role of the bishop, and these differing sensibilities would eventually become one of the key issues in the post-Whitby conflict between the Northumbrian Church and state. Aidan, who came to Lindisfarne from Iona, was educated as a monk within the context of abbatial rule; Wilfrid, with his intense love for all things Roman, had a great appreciation for the superior authority of the bishopric. The clash between these two notions of episcopal authority in the years following the Synod of Whitby would account for much of the changing relationship between Northumbrian throne and Northumbrian clergy.

The Episcopate in Ireland, 432-563

Many have noted Patrick’s efforts to organize his Irish ecclesiastical foundations along the lines of those he had known as the son and grandson of clerics in Britain. The fact, however, that Ireland had never fallen under Roman imperial rule, was problematic.

¹ Kathleen Hughes, “The Celtic Church: Is This a Valid Concept,” *Cambridge Medieval Celtic Studies* 1 (Summer 1981): 2.

Unlike Britain, its neighbor, which had been created a secular diocese during the Diocletian reforms at the turn of the fourth century, Ireland had no ready-made infrastructure upon which to organize its religious hierarchy.² There also were no real urban centers, which on the European continent were “the building blocks from which the entire [ecclesiastical] structure was created.”³ Accordingly, the earliest missionaries to Ireland sought an organizational template in the preexisting political units of Irish society, the *túatha*.⁴

Hughes reached this conclusion based upon a text known as *The Bishops’ Synod*, which outlines the proceedings of a council purportedly presided over by Patrick and his episcopal colleagues.⁵ In this document, the overarching authority of the bishop is emphasized several times: “[i]f,” it instructs, “a new incumbent enters the parish he shall not baptize, nor offer, nor consecrate, nor build a church until he receives permission from the bishop”; “[t]here shall be no wandering cleric in a parish [without the bishop’s consent]”; “[a]ny cleric who has recently entered the parish of a bishop is not permitted to baptize and offer, nor to do anything: if he does not act accordingly he shall be

² See Thomas Charles-Edwards, *Early Christian Ireland* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 242; A.H.M. Jones, *Constantine and the Conversion of Europe*, rev. ed. (London: Penguin Books, 1972), 36; Hughes, 3.

³ Charles-Edwards, 242.

⁴ Hughes, 1. The *túath* corresponded roughly to “the lay people of a small kingdom.” The term, according to Charles-Edwards, contained a complex set of meanings, from the sharing of pasturage to the delimitation of public functions. Charles-Edwards, 102, 102-6.

⁵ Hughes and Charles-Edwards date this manuscript to the early to mid-sixth century, “no more than one or two generations after St. Patrick”; if this dating is accurate, then the document “gives us precious evidence for the Irish Church in the form in which the missionary efforts of Patrick and others had left it.” *Ibid.*, 247, 245-7. See also Hughes, 2.

excommunicate.”⁶ In each of these cases, the term “parish” is translated from the Latin *in plebe*, among the people. It is most likely, argues Charles-Edwards, that in this case the *plebs* over whom the bishop presided corresponds to the *túath* in its political sense (that is, the subjects of a small kingdom), and thus delimits both the bishop’s congregation and his area of operations. “The clear implication is,” he explains, “that the early missionaries in Ireland made the decision to take the *túath* as the unit of episcopal government corresponding to the *civitas* of the Empire.”⁷

Both Hughes and Charles-Edwards concur in their view of the episcopal structure of the early Irish Church, although the latter hesitates to place too much emphasis on the absence of urban centers.⁸ By the mid-seventh century, however, both find evidence of a departure from this episcopal uniformity. In the context possibly of the developing Easter Controversy, seventh-century canons are divided between “Roman” and “Irish” prescriptions; both demonstrate a high degree of respect for the office of the bishop, but in the latter “the main jurisdictional official” appears to be the abbot, who, rather than the bishop, “controls church property.”⁹ This shift, in Hughes’ mind, was due to the relatively minor role of the petty king during times of peace. “The people who held

⁶ *Canons Attributed to St. Patrick* 24, 3, 27, in John T. McNeill and Helena M. Gamer, *Medieval Handbooks of Penance: A Translation of the Principal Libri Poenitentiales and Selections from Related Documents*, Records of Western Civilization, ed. Robert Somerville (New York: Columbia University Press, 1938; reprint, 1990), 79, 77.

⁷ Charles-Edwards, 248, 247. See also *Canons of Patrick*, in McNeill and Gamer, 76n10.

⁸ On the continent, notes Charles-Edwards, “many cities would probably have vanished in the sixth and seventh centuries if they had not been episcopal centres: the bishop often sustained the city, not the city the bishop.” Charles-Edwards, 242. However, this addresses the persistence of urban centers left over from imperial days, not, as in the case of Ireland, the total absence of the same. Even a bishop could not sustain what was not there in the first place. Hughes’ appreciation of the “ground up” nature of early Irish church work seems more appropriate here.

⁹ Hughes, 2.

power [during these times],” noted Hughes, “were the leaders of the kin; and it was the kin who controlled the monasteries.” By this route, the monasteries soon achieved a level of influence rivalling that of the episcopate.¹⁰ Furthermore, the monastic *paruchia*, “group[s] of daughter-monasteries controlled by the abbot of the mother-house,” which began to consolidate in the mid-sixth century in many cases included territory belonging to more than one *túath*, which meant that “the authority of the abbots of great monasteries could...overshadow that of the bishops,” whose area of influence was bounded by the extent of the petty kingdom. In some cases the more powerful abbots began to take on a role similar to that of the bishop, appointing priors to subordinate houses and carrying out visitations of the member communities of the *paruchia*.¹¹

While Charles-Edwards agrees that “in the first half of the seventh century..., bishops at least shared power with the heads of the greater monasteries,” he does not share Hughes’ belief that by the beginning of the eighth century the latter had supplanted the former. He insists that “[t]he power, wealth and wide connections of the great monasteries [in the eighth century] does not imply that they had replaced the episcopal churches.”¹² This conclusion is supported, among other things, by the archiepiscopal struggle which erupted between Armagh, the traditional see of Patrick, and Kildare, that of Brigit, in the last three decades of the seventh century. An episcopal conflict capable

¹⁰ Hughes, 14. During this period monasteries became part of a propertied inheritance, which was determined according to patrilineal descent. On the other hand, *febas*, “the personal standing which sustained a man’s claim to high office,” was determined in large part by way of the matriline. Charles-Edwards, 84-96. This division carried with it a potential for intrafamilial conflict between those who controlled the monasteries and those who occupied the throne, which may have added another element to the competing roles of abbot and bishop, if, as Hughes suggested, the bishop was tied more firmly to the king than to the monastery.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 245, 250-1.

¹² *Ibid.*, 258, 251. “[T]he church which emerged in Ireland [in the eighth century] was something quite different in organization from the Roman church.” Hughes, 2.

of involving every ecclesiastical authority from the north of Ireland to the papacy in Rome does not seem to be in consonance with a hierarchical system in decline.¹³ Instead of envisioning a situation in which one form of church government completely overshadowed the other, it appears more likely that the Irish Church was characterized by an organizational dialectic. At one and the same time, two equal and opposite forces, one episcopal, the other “peculiarly monastic,” maintained a tension within the Church which constitutes the true distinctiveness of the Church in Ireland.¹⁴

It was not necessarily a lack of academic integrity, noted John Dowden in 1894, which allowed earlier historians—particularly during the sixteenth-century Reformation—to perceive in the Church of the Celtic world an early form of Presbyterianism. “[E]ven apart from the misleading influences of party sentiment,” he explained, “it was in fact not difficult for writers in the sixteenth, seventeenth, and indeed, as one may add, the eighteenth century, to misunderstand, or to draw unwarrantable inferences from the documents that were most ready at hand.”¹⁵ Adherents of this “early presbytery” theory found in Aidan’s episcopal ordination apparent support for their ideas. Bede relates that after the failure of the first Ionan mission, led by Cormac, “the Irish fathers” gathered to discuss their next move. At some point during the discussion, Aidan spoke up, was recognized as “a fit person to be made

¹³ Caitlin Corning, *The Celtic and Roman Traditions: Conflict and Consensus in the Early Medieval Church* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 100, 102. See also Charles-Edwards, 416-40.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 259.

¹⁵ John Dowden, *The Celtic Church in Scotland: Being an Introduction to the History of the Christian Church in Scotland down to the Death of Saint Margaret* (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1894), 250.

bishop,” and was consequently consecrated and dispatched to Northumbria.¹⁶ All manner of confusion, according to Dowden, has been derived from this text. The Latin identifies these fathers as the *conventus seniorum* (the assembly of the elders) and this, coupled with Bede’s apparent insinuation that it was they who consecrated Aidan, has led many to suggest that a government of elders was in place at Iona, and that these men saw no need either for episcopal consent or participation in such affairs.¹⁷

Beyond the immediate question, which asks why this body of elders, if such was their organizational preference, felt the need to ordain a bishop at all, Dowden, a critic of this denominational interpretation, offers several rebuttals. If Oswald, who was converted by the monks of Iona, had not in his time among these clerics encountered men of episcopal grade, why would he send to them for a bishop?¹⁸ More importantly, why is there so much evidence in Adomnán’s *Life* of Columba, the founding saint of Iona, not only of episcopal activity at that monastery, but of its founder’s great respect for those who held such a position? Adomnán recounted at one point the story of a visit to Columba by a stranger from Munster, who “out of humility...did not want people to know that he was a bishop.” He could not, however, hide the truth from the saintly abbot: as he approached the altar to celebrate the Eucharist, Columba turned to the visitor and bade

¹⁶ Bede, *Ecclesiastical History of the English People* III.5, in *Ecclesiastical History of the English People with Bede’s Letter to Egbert and Cuthbert’s Letter on the Death of Bede*, trans. and ed. Leo Sherley-Price, R.E. Latham, and D.H. Farmer, rev. ed. (London: Penguin Books, 1990), 151.

¹⁷ Dowden, 263-5. Leslie Hardinge adopts this view in his study of Celtic Christianity, comparing Aidan’s ordination to the commissioning of Paul and Barnabas by the Antiochene Church, in Acts. Leslie Hardinge, *The Celtic Church in Britain* (London: SPCK, 1972; reprint, New York: TEACH Services, 2005), 132.

¹⁸ Dowden, 265.

him take the host and “[b]reak [it] alone according to the rite of a bishop.”¹⁹ At another point, the biographer told of the arrival in Britain of a priest named Findchán, who brought with him a certain Áed Dub, “a very bloody man [who] had killed many people,” but who nevertheless had been ordained a priest in his companion’s monastery. This ordination, Adomnán explained, “was invalid even though a bishop had been brought,” because Findchán, a mere priest, had participated in the rite. Upon hearing of this, Columba pronounced a curse upon the two men, who had gone “against the law of God and of the Church.”²⁰ From these two examples, Dowden concluded that “[i]n [Columba’s] time, and in the missionary Church founded by him, it is absolutely certain that bishops existed as a distinct order, possessing powers and privileges which were not shared in by presbyters.”²¹

These two pieces of evidence from Adomnán’s *Life* also led Dowden to another interesting conclusion regarding the office of the bishop in the Columban Church, which though dated is still worthy of consideration. Bede, in a brief chapter in the *History* on the foundation of Iona, revealed startling information concerning the hierarchical organization of the Ionan monastery:

Iona is always ruled by an abbot in priest’s orders, to whose authority the whole province, including the bishops, is subject, contrary to the usual custom. This practice was established by its first abbot Columba, who was not a bishop himself, but a priest and a monk.²²

¹⁹ Adomnán of Iona, *Life of St. Columba* I.44, trans. Richard Sharpe (London: Penguin Books, 1995), 147.

²⁰ Adomnán *LSC* I.36, in Sharpe, 138-9.

²¹ Dowden, 251.

²² Bede *EH* III.4, in Sherley-Price, Latham, and Farmer, 149. D.H. Farmer notes, however, that this custom should in no way be regarded as characteristic of Ireland as a whole. D.H. Farmer, notes to *Ecclesiastical History*, in Sherley-Price, Latham, and Farmer, 368. This is most likely true, and must be in part responsible for Bede’s presentation of this idiosyncrasy as worthy of note.

Noting that the only person involved in the Áed Dub episode not included in Columba's curse was the ordaining bishop, Dowden attributed this apparent oversight to the truth of Bede's claim. The explanation for this omission, he suggested, most likely lay in the fact that, as a member of a fellow Columban community, the offender would have been subject first to the abbot of his house, to whom the Ionan saint evidently yielded in his judgment.²³ Adding this detail to those provided by Adomnán in the stories cited above, Dowden perceived a bishop whose importance derived not from his territorial jurisdiction, as in the case of the early *tuath*-bound bishops of Ireland, but almost exclusively from his function vis-à-vis the sacraments of the Church. From the tale of Cronan the bishop, it appears evident that the visitor's services were not required for the proper celebration of the Eucharist, although they obviously were welcomed. On the other hand, Columba's consternation upon learning of Áed Dub's faulty ordination stemmed from the fact that it was not conferred through proper episcopal (apostolic) intercession, which to the saint apparently was an indispensable part of the process. Dowden was forced to conclude that, although the abbot held the higher authority, since "the episcopal offices belonging to ordination had to be performed,...we very commonly find a bishop among the members of the community."²⁴ This unique limitation of episcopal authority stemmed from the predominantly monastic nature of the Church in Columba's domain: "[i]n a country where religion is represented by the monastic system,

²³ Dowden, 255.

²⁴ Ibid.

while the bishop's 'right of order' remains untouched, his 'right of jurisdiction' is affected."²⁵

The veracity of Dowden's conclusions depends to a large degree on the extent to which Adomnán's account of Iona during Columba's time may be accepted as historically sound. Richard Sharpe warns the reader to tread carefully in this respect:

What Adomnán wrote about his patron, Columba, stands at the end of three generations of tradition. It was further shaped by Adomnán's personal understanding of the saint and what his life was to represent, and by Adomnán's reading of the Lives of other saints, especially those of St. Martin of Tours, St. Anthony and St. Benedict. We have no way of knowing whether Adomnán thought it necessary to distinguish between the outward facts of daily life when Columba was alive and those of his own time, up to a century later. Even the details of monastic life at Iona may have more to do with Adomnán's time than with Columba's. Although a Life written in the late seventh century may apparently promise an authentic account of a saint from the late sixth century, it cannot be trusted as a historical narrative.²⁶

It is evident that Dowden failed to make such a cautious distinction between Adomnán's intentions and the facts he provided in the *Life*.²⁷ Still, if there is any truth at all in Bede's account of Iona's idiosyncratic organization, then Columba's foundation in Britain represented an extreme of structural evolution far removed from both continental

²⁵ Dowden, 256.

²⁶ Richard Sharpe, trans., introduction to Adomnán, *Life of St. Columba* (London: Penguin Books, 1995), 5. Ian Bradley also notes the pedagogical purposes of Adomnán's hagiographical effort: "The classic *Vita* written by Adomnán, abbot of Iona from 679 to 704, marked a decisive final stage in Columba's 'canonisation.' Its stress was almost entirely on the saint's supernatural and miraculous powers, as attested by the themes of its three sections—prophetic revelations, miracles of power, and visions of angels." Rather than attempting to create a historical account of a man's life, "Adomnán's self-proclaimed aim was to provide proofs of his venerable subject's sanctity." Ian Bradley, *Celtic Christianity: Making Myths and Chasing Dreams* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1999), 18.

²⁷ "Whatever may be thought of [Adomnán's] narratives of miraculous occurrences, there is no reason to suppose that he was not an honest relater of what he heard from others or found recorded in writing. And the innumerable notices of the ordinary incidents in the story of the founder of his house bear the unquestionable stamp of truthfulness. The whole work abounds in material by the help of which it is not difficult to reconstruct with much reasonable confidence the constitution of the brotherhood and to picture to ourselves the daily life of its members." Dowden, 81.

and early Patrician models. Peter Brown describes a much different dynamic in play on the Continent during the years of monastic development in Ireland. At the time of Iona's foundation, he estimates the existence of 220 monasteries in Gaul, with another hundred in the Italian peninsula. "Both convents and monasteries," he writes, "lived under the shadow of the urban bishops," who not only "protected and supervised them" but in many cases were responsible for their formation.²⁸ The impact of Ireland's non-urban society upon the outward form of the early Church has already been acknowledged; it is perhaps not too much of a logical stretch to suggest a similar explanation for the role reversal described by Bede at Iona.

There is some evidence that Irish monasteries had to some extent an urbanizing influence in their native society. Rather than signifying a city proper, notes Charles-Edwards, in Ireland the *civitas* often entailed "a major ecclesiastical settlement"; specifically, this term denoted a church "served by a variety of offices, principally a priest (or, in some cases a bishop), a scribe (roughly a combination of exegete and ecclesiastical judge) and a steward."²⁹ A *civitas* could be either a monastery or a convent, or both, and included not only those who had taken monastic vows, but also those layfolk who served the community, who were also referred to as *manach* (from the Latin, *monachus*).³⁰ The most influential of these *civitates* showed glimmerings of urban

²⁸ Peter Brown, *The Rise of Western Christendom: Triumph and Diversity, A.D. 200-1000*, 2nd ed., The Making of Europe, ed. Jacques Le Goff (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2003), 221.

²⁹ Charles-Edwards, 119.

³⁰ "A *manach* could be anyone who had subjected himself to the rule and discipline of an abbot; he was not always a monk in the sense of someone who had taken monastic vows of celibacy and poverty, as well as obedience." By the same token, a *civitas* was not of necessity a monastic community, the "monastic vocabulary" having been extended in some cases into the secular sphere. Ibid., 119, 121. This broad application of the *manach* label is a source of some confusion, since it leads to a sometimes exaggerated emphasis on the monastic aspect of early Irish life. Corning, 98. However, it must be noted

development, “for example, an unusual density of population associated with a variety of crafts, transcending the agricultural sphere; an area delimited by a boundary and enjoying a special legal status.” This legal status included the right of sanctuary, modelled upon the “cities of refuge” in the Old Testament. Because of this aspect of monastic life, the population of a *civitas* was in constant flux, as people seeking that shelter came and went as their fortunes rose and fell.³¹ In short, these monastic centers to an extent contained the germ of urban living.

“[T]he major *civitates*,” explains Charles-Edwards, “had bishops, for whose pastoral work a monastery might provide a base, although the monks or nuns themselves probably did not engage in pastoral work outside their monasteries.”³² As one of these major monastic centers, Iona would have provided a convenient stopover for wayfaring bishops, positioned as it was between Ireland and Britain. Richard Sharpe notes that “Columba himself was at the centre of a network of communications, involving travel by land and sea; he was in contact with many places in Dalriada, with his own churches in Ireland, and with Irish leaders and people in many other places.”³³ Bede’s suggestion of a role reversal between the abbot and the bishop fits well into a setting in which the true focus of leadership fell upon the abbot, into whose domain from time to time a bishop would enter in the course of his evangelistic labor. The bishop, while part of the community, would not be its head, for two reasons. Since in some cases the abbot’s

that the extension of monastic terminology into secular life does seem to indicate the pervasive influence of monasticism in the development of Irish society.

³¹ Charles-Edwards, 119-20

³² *Ibid.*, 119.

³³ Sharpe, 22-3. This claim is borne out by Adomnán’s *Life*, in which the biographer depicted a constant stream of visitors, including Cronan and Áed Dub, to and from the island.

authority surpassed the borders of the *túath* in which a given monastery lay, the authority of a bishop, limited as it was to the petty kingdom itself, would have been less extensive than that of a powerful abbot.³⁴ Furthermore, the abbacy of a given monastery or *paruchia*, unlike the episcopacy, was often hereditary, passed down from one member of a kin group to another.³⁵ For these reasons, rather than the bishop being the guardian of the monastery, as on the Continent, the abbot would act as the protector of both the *civitas* and its episcopal complement.

In its theological and doctrinal orientation, then, the Irish Church was a product of the Christian Church at large, while in its structure it was, to a degree, distinct from other regional branches of the early medieval Church. Patrick's early work in Ireland stood at the purely episcopal end of the spectrum; if Bede's testimony is trustworthy, it would seem that the community of Iona occupied the opposite extreme. Aidan, Iona's emissary to Oswald, would as a product of the Columban tradition likely have been affected by the idiosyncratic organization of his community, in which the role of the abbot may have taken precedence over that of the bishop. In taking this abbatial emphasis with him to Northumbria, the missionary may have lit the fuse which eventually exploded into the Wilfridian church-state conflict of the post-Whitby years.

³⁴ Charles-Edwards, 251; Corning, 100-101; Hughes, 1.

³⁵ “[T]he monasteries were private holdings [and] hereditary possessions,...whereas the bishops were public officials closely connected with the king.” Ibid., 14. Richard Sharpe notes the fact that many of Columba's successors to the abbacy of Iona were, like him, members of the Cenél Conaill, “suggesting that for at least a century after Columba's death Iona remained securely linked to this branch of the Northern Uí Néill.” Sharpe, 27.

The Wandering Bishops

“Having no sees and no endowments,” John Dowden wrote of the Ionan bishops, “it was easy for every considerable monastery to possess a bishop for the performance of such ecclesiastical offices as were confined to the highest order of the ministry.”³⁶ Working off of the theories of earlier scholars, Dowden conjures up the image of a bishop who, being defined by his role rather than by geographical boundaries, was free to roam the land, doing the work of the Church as he went. Cronan, the bishop who in Adomnán’s *Life* visited the Iona community, is a possible example of such a bishop, being presented as a pilgrim rather than as a member of the community itself, but he is only one example, and a shaky one at that. However, evidence from the Northumbrian branch of the Columban *familia* suggests that Dowden’s claims may not have been far from the mark.

The peripatetic nature of the Celtic episcopate has been, along with the monastic missionary tendencies of Celtic Christianity in general, a key element in recent popular studies. Leslie Hardinge, in 1972, suggested the existence of two sorts of bishop within the Celtic Church, those who officially were attached to a particular monastic community, and those who were free to wander:

But the presbyter-bishops who did not live in monasteries evidently acted as spiritual helpers to Christians whom they served as counsellors and whom they led in worship. These bishops seem to have been tied neither to locality nor to congregation, and were free to perform the functions of the office wherever Christian people might desire it. Under the jurisdiction of no authority, they were found wandering throughout all Celtic lands, much to the disgust of later

³⁶ Dowden, 259.

metropolitans who wished for the discipline and organization of diocesan authority.³⁷

Echoing this idea, David Adam, Vicar of Holy Island, noted that within a crystallized diocesan structure, a bishop “didn’t overlap into the next person’s territory.” On the other hand, “[i]f you were a Celtic bishop, quite often you roamed wherever you felt the Spirit took you, and you didn’t have such a fixed area.”³⁸ Of Aidan himself, Elizabeth Rees noted: “It appears that [he] did not spend a great deal of time with his community, since we hear of him travelling on lengthy preaching tours, and celebrating Easter not with his monks but with the royal household [of Oswald] at Bamburgh.”³⁹

While popular Celtic Christian authors are represented regularly as somewhat out of their depth, on the issue of the walkabout bishops of Northumbria they seem to have read the evidence fairly well. Rees’ point about Aidan is well-taken: while in the popular mind he has been associated firmly with Lindisfarne and its community, the majority of Bede’s account of the saint—which is admittedly sparse—dealt with Aidan outside the island context. In the seven chapters of the *Ecclesiastical History* dealing with that saint, in fact, Lindisfarne is mentioned only once, as the see granted to Aidan by Oswald upon his arrival from Iona.⁴⁰ Otherwise, he is either away, as Rees suggested, on preaching tours of the king’s territory, dining with the king in the royal household, or ensconced in

³⁷ Hardinge, 131, 130-1.

³⁸ David Adam, quoted in Peter M. Kershaw, prod. and dir., *Memorable Leaders in Christian History: Cuthbert*, VHS (Worcester, PA: Gateway Films Vision Video, 1999). Adam has written both prose and verse on Celtic Christianity, and has been instrumental in the development of what Donald Meek calls “an alternative ‘Celtic tradition.’” Meek lumps Adam in with “the more insensitive wing of the ‘Celtic Christianity’ movement,” and obviously has no great respect for his scholarly abilities. Donald E. Meek, *The Quest for Celtic Christianity* (Edinburgh: The Handsel Press, 2000), 12, 11.

³⁹ Elizabeth Rees, *Celtic Saints: Passionate Wanderers* (New York: Thames & Hudson, 2000), 169.

⁴⁰ Bede *EH* III.3, in Sherley-Price, Latham, and Farmer, 147.

anchoritic solitude on Inner Farne. Even in death, Bede's account separates the man from his island: Aidan died, not on Lindisfarne among his subordinates, but at a royal residence not far from the king's headquarters at Bamburgh.⁴¹ Whether or not Hardinge's episcopal distinctions—between the stationary bishop and the perambulatory—may be considered a hard and fast rule in the Celtic Church, at the very least Aidan's mobile career suggests that churchmen of episcopal grade in Northumbria did not necessarily consider themselves to be defined by their physical jurisdiction.⁴²

It has been noted that Theodore of Tarsus, appointed Archbishop of Canterbury soon after the Synod of Whitby, was no friend of the earlier Celtic leadership of Northumbria. He also appears not to have been overly sanguine on the issue of wandering clergy, which according to Hardinge was so vexatious to metropolitans in the insular world.⁴³ In 673, at a synod convened at Hertford for the purpose primarily of establishing once and for all a universal English standard for the celebration of Easter, the archbishop dealt also with the elasticity of the existing episcopate. It was commanded “[t]hat no bishop intrude into the diocese of another, but confine himself to the guidance of the people committed to his charge,” and “that it shall be unlawful for any of them to exercise any priestly function without permission from the bishop in whose diocese they

⁴¹ Bede *EH* III.3, 5, 6, 16, 17, in Sherley-Price, Latham, and Farmer, 147, 150-1, 168-9. Charles-Edwards also notes the peripatetic nature of the majority of Aidan's ministry. Charles-Edwards, 314-15.

⁴² After Oswald's death, with the Northumbrian kingdom divided again into its Deiran and Bernician components, Bede indicates that Aidan freely transcended the northern kingdom, which was the home of his episcopal see, to interact with Oswin, ruler of the southern kingdom, and his people. Bede *EH* III.14, in Sherley-Price, Latham, and Farmer, 166-7. This is further evidence of Aidan's extra-geographical conception of his episcopal role.

⁴³ Ted Olsen, *Christianity and the Celts* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 155.

are known to be.”⁴⁴ It is not unreasonable to suppose that some of the remaining Irish-trained clergy, such as Chad at Lichfield in Mercia, had continued the habit of moving about the countryside with little regard for theoretical boundaries. The decrees of the Synod of Hertford are at least suggestive of a practice among bishops, possibly imported by Aidan and his followers from Iona, of viewing their office as more role-oriented than geographically determined.

Out of the Desert

Bede related that as the Ionan monks flooded into his kingdom, Oswald “of his bounty gave lands and endowments to establish monasteries,” and that “[c]hurches were built in several places.” One of these, presumably, was the “larger and more noble basilica of stone” at York, begun by Edwin in 627 and completed by Oswald during his brief reign.⁴⁵ Unlike his Augustinian predecessor Paulinus, however, Aidan apparently did not choose to identify his episcopate either with an urban center or with what Bede describes as a magnificent church, but instead to install his ministry on the small tidal island of Lindisfarne. Clare Stancliffe points out that, in the midst of Oswald’s generosity, “Aidan actually owned only his church and a small amount of land on Holy Island.”⁴⁶ It is in this withdrawn side of Aidan’s personality that one discovers a key element of the Northumbrian episcopate prior to the Synod of Whitby.

⁴⁴ Bede *EH* IV.5, in Sherley-Price, Latham, and Farmer, 214. There is a striking parallel between the rules promulgated by the Synod of Hertford and those listed in the earlier *Bishops’ Synod*.

⁴⁵ Bede *EH* III.3, II.14, in Sherley-Price, Latham, and Farmer, 147, 131.

⁴⁶ Clare Stancliffe, “Oswald, ‘Most Holy and Victorious King of the Northumbrians,’” in Clare Stancliffe and Eric Cambridge, eds., *Oswald: Northumbrian King to European Saint* (Stamford, UK: Paul Watkins, 1995), 65.

Adomnán, in the *Life of St. Columba*, described the saint “set[ting] off into the wilder parts of the island to find a place secluded from other people where he could pray alone.”⁴⁷ In this retreat, Columba offers an illustration of a monastic tradition composed of an intriguing union of cenobitic and anchoritic inclinations, a combination Peter-Damian Belisle called “[t]he middle way.”⁴⁸ This was a dual emphasis which Aidan took with him into Northumbria in 635, and it defined him in large part as both abbot and bishop. In this way, he was a part of a much wider reality: this mixture of communion and isolation had been an integral part of the Western monastic experience since the foundation in 400 of the monastery at Lérins off the southern coast of France, “an outpost of the wilderness of Egypt placed within sight of the sun-beaten slopes of the Alpes-Maritimes.”⁴⁹ Within this island community some of the greatest exponents of both cenobitic and anchoritic monasticism penned their masterpieces: Eucherius of Lyons, in his isolation there wrote his twin theses, *In Praise of the Desert* and *On Contempt for the World and Secular Philosophy*.⁵⁰ At the same time in Marseilles, John Cassian, whose writings had such a strong influence on the monks of Ireland and Britain, was busy producing his masterworks, the *Institutions of the Monastic Life* and the *Conferences*, in which he compiled a record of interviews he had been granted during his time in Egypt

⁴⁷ Adomnán *LSC* III.8, in Sharpe, 211.

⁴⁸ This “middle way” is defined as a monastic vocation that falls somewhere “between the poles of strictly anchoritic solitude and cenobitic monasticism.” Peter-Damian Belisle, *The Language of Silence: The Changing Face of Monastic Solitude*, Traditions of Christian Spirituality, ed. Philip Sheldrake (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2003), 77.

⁴⁹ Brown, 111.

⁵⁰ Belisle, 66-8.

with the famed Desert Fathers.⁵¹ Through his works, Cassian claimed, “it was possible...to live in a cell in any part of the world, and still to live as if one were in Egypt.”⁵²

This combination of isolation and integration, which had formed such a vital part of Aidan’s Columban training, is evident in his choice of episcopal see. As a tidal island, Lindisfarne is joined to the mainland by a stretch of land that is impassable at high tide; one seventeenth-century visitor quaintly described it as “an ifland but twice a day, [which was] embraced by Neptune only at full tide, and at Ebbe fhaked hands with the Continent.”⁵³ The present-day pilgrim to the island is at times overwhelmed by the feeling of disconnection from the mainland across the water—it seems the ideal destination for those of an ascetic bent—but, suggests David Rollason, this pilgrim must not be fooled. “[W]e tend to think...in terms of road—land—transport,” he explains, “but it’s perfectly clear that the Northumbrian kings possessed very considerable naval capability.”⁵⁴ Looking inland, one of Aidan’s contemporaries might have observed a ramshackle cluster of wooden huts in which the monks lived and worshiped, while, facing the island’s harbor, he might have seen a great fleet of Oswald’s ships at anchor, populating the waters that separated Lindisfarne from the royal abode at Bamburgh. It is, then, not entirely appropriate to think of the island’s original community in terms of

⁵¹ Brown, 111; Belisle, 68-71; Thomas O’Loughlin, *Celtic Theology: Humanity, World and God in Early Irish Writings* (London: Continuum, 2000), 53.

⁵² Brown, 111.

⁵³ [Richard Baddeley], *The Legend of St. Cuthbert, with the Antiquities of the Church of Durham* (London: Christopher Eccleston, 1663), microfilm, 4.

⁵⁴ David Rollason, quoted in Peter M. Kershaw, prod. and dir., *Memorable Leaders in Christian History: Aidan*, VHS (Worcester, PA: Gateway Films Vision Video, 1999). Rollason is a professor of medieval history at the University of Durham.

complete isolation; instead, it is more apt to see Aidan's choice of headquarters as removed, but not exactly remote, a circumstance which would allow the bishop to indulge in his ascetic pursuits while still being able to communicate with his royal patron.⁵⁵

As a bishop, Aidan's personality presents the student of his life with an interplay of two opposing forces—withdrawal on the one hand, involvement on the other. He is in this sense a microcosm of the tension described by Charles-Edwards as constituting the singular nature of the Irish Church of the seventh and eighth centuries.⁵⁶ Both abbot and bishop, monk and minister, it is difficult to determine which facet of Aidan's character dominated the other. In Bede, one must acknowledge the great extent to which the saint's episcopal title becomes obscured by his missionary zeal and his penchant for solitary contemplation. If John Dowden's theory is correct, and bishops were set apart by their exclusive competency in the higher office of ordination, perhaps Aidan's ordination before his departure from Iona fulfilled a largely utilitarian function; he was the first to go, and needed the authority to ordain if the work was to grow. Furthermore, if Bede's account of the structure of the community of Iona is accurate—the bishop being subordinate to the abbot—perhaps this is the key to Aidan's self-perception. In any case, if Bede's testimony is to be believed—and it is the only testimony available—there seems to have been something in Aidan's personality which balanced these two roles, ameliorating the aceticism of the monk, and regulating the ambitions of the bishop.

⁵⁵ Rollason, quoted in Kershaw, *Aidan*. Aidan's choice of Lindisfarne may also reflect his Columban background; Richard Sharpe indicates a similar dynamic in Columba's selection of Iona as a monastic center. Sharpe, 23.

⁵⁶ See p. 120, above.

The Aidanic Episcopate and the State

Oswald, Aidan's royal Northumbrian patron, in 634 marched into his rightful kingdom on the heels of an experience similar to Constantine's before the Milvian Bridge.⁵⁷ On the night before the battle at *Hefenfelth* (Heavenfield), as the aspirant king lay sleeping, Adomnán wrote, St. Columba came to him in a dream, urging him to rise up with haste and go immediately into battle, for the Lord had granted to Columba his saint victory for Oswald and his men. According to Columba's biographer, the prince without hesitation went out into the night to meet the forces of Cadwallon the usurper in the guise of a medieval Gideon, "march[ing] out from the camp into battle with a modest force against many thousands."⁵⁸ Bede shared this story as well, adding a significant detail: before engaging the enemy, the prince directed his men to fashion a great wooden cross. When this had been done "the devout king with ardent faith took the cross and placed it in position, holding it upright with his own hands until the soldiers had thrown in the earth and it stood firm." This sign, together with the name of the field of battle, loomed large in Bede's imagination; it was "a sure omen of events to come, portending that there the heavenly sign would be set up, a heavenly victory won, and heavenly wonders shown."⁵⁹

To seventh- and eighth-century observers, Oswald's victory over the forces of Cadwallon—the victory of Christ over the forces of pagan ignorance—marked a divine

⁵⁷ See Charles-Edwards, 312.

⁵⁸ Adomnán *LSC* I.1, in Sharpe, 111.

⁵⁹ Bede *EH* III.2, in Sherley-Price, Latham, and Farmer, 144, 145.

turning point in the history of all Britain.⁶⁰ England, wrote Adomnán, which to that time had been “darkened by the shadow of heathendom and ignorance,” had been set free from its bonds; for the first time, rejoiced Bede, the religion of the north found expression in Christian rather than pagan signs and symbols.⁶¹ The accession of Oswald to the throne of Northumbria had widespread implications for his own and many surrounding kingdoms. “One of the brightest features of early English Christianity,” wrote Edgar Gibson, “is the eager way in which kings used their influence to further its spread through the neighboring kingdoms.”⁶² This encomium seems to have been true of Oswald: the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle lists, in an entry for 635, the baptism of Cynegils, king of the West Saxons, and mentions Oswald as his baptismal sponsor.⁶³

The new Northumbrian king’s Christianity facilitated Aidan’s ministry in a unique way in the history of the insular Church. Before 635, pioneering missionary efforts in both Britain and Ireland had been undertaken in the face of resistant rulers. Palladius, dispatched to Ireland by Celestine I in 430, found himself on the wrong side of Nathi, king of the Uí Garrchon, and promptly abandoned his mission; Patrick, in his various *Lives*, began his work in Ireland by clashing violently with Lóegaire, king of the Uí Néill, on the plain of Tara; Columba, upon reaching Dal Riata in 563, set himself the

⁶⁰ It may not be entirely accurate to call Cadwallon a pagan, but he was at the very least an apostate. Bede refers to him as both “godless” and as one who merely “professed to call himself a Christian.” Bede *EH* III.1, II.20, in Sherley-Price, Latham, and Farmer, 143, 140.

⁶¹ Adomnán *LSC* I.1, in Sharpe, 111; Bede *EH* III.2, in Sherley-Price, Latham, and Farmer, 145. See also Charles-Edwards, 312-13

⁶² Edgar S.C. Gibson, *Northumbrian Saints, or, Chapters from the Early History of the English Church* (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1884), 29. See also Charles-Edwards, 313.

⁶³ Michael Swanton, trans. and ed., *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* (New York: Routledge, 1998), 26, 27. See also Bede *EH* III.7, in Sherley-Price, Latham, and Farmer, 153. While there is no doubt that Oswald’s evangelistic actions had political overtones, one need not dismiss all of the praise Bede heaped upon this warrior of the Christian faith. Stancliffe, 52-3, 61-75.

task of converting Bridei, the heathen king of the Picts, during the first encounter of which effort the saint was forced to storm the royal palace.⁶⁴ Unlike these men, Aidan met with no resistance from his royal counterpart; his was a smooth path—even Lindisfarne, his base of operations, was given to him at his choosing by a king eager to see his people converted. “This deliberate concentration on missionary work and close partnership with the king,” notes Stancliffe, “is something which, as far as the Irish were concerned, appears to be unique to the Lindisfarne mission and its daughter missions, and there can be no doubt that both factors were important for its success.”⁶⁵

Bede’s account describes an almost equal partnership between king and cleric, to the point that Aidan, who arrived in Northumbria “a monoglot Irishman,” on his first preaching tours used Oswald as an interpreter.⁶⁶ However, while the friendship between the royal and religious leaders is depicted in stronger terms in their case than in others, close contact between church and state was not unusual in Ireland and Britain. Columba himself was of royal stock, a member of the Cenél Conaill branch of the northern Uí Néill, which ruled most of what is now County Donegal.⁶⁷ In this capacity, the saint served as a go-between for the Uí Néill and the rulers of Dal Riata, in whose territory Iona was situated. Adomnán described a meeting at Druim Cett (around 590) between

⁶⁴ For the conflict between Palladius and Nathi, see Whitley Stokes, trans. and ed., *The Tripartite Life of Patrick, with Other Documents Relating to that Saint*, vol. 1 (London: Eyre & Spottiswoode, 1887), 31; Charles-Edwards, 234-7. For Patrick’s encounter with Lôegaire and his agents, see *Tripartite Life*, 33-5, 41-61; Muirchú, *Life of Patrick* 9, 15-21, in Oliver Davies and Thomas O’Loughlin, trans. and ed., *Celtic Spirituality*, The Classics of Western Spirituality 96, ed. Bernard McGinn (New York: Paulist Press, 1999), 96, 99-105. For Columba’s encounter with Bridei, see Adomnán *LSC* II.35, in Sharpe, 184.

⁶⁵ Stancliffe, 81.

⁶⁶ Charles-Edwards, 315. See also Bede *EH* III.3, in Sherley-Price, Latham, and Farmer, 147.

⁶⁷ Charles-Edwards points out that this was true of most of the abbots of Iona until the latter half of the eighth century. Charles-Edwards, 282-3.

these kings, at which Columba was in attendance: Sharpe suggests that it was through the offices of the saint that the meeting was arranged.⁶⁸ At other times, Columba is placed at the center of both Uí Néill and Dal Riata dynastic concerns. While attending the meeting at Druim Cett, the abbot of Iona, predicted the accession to the Uí Néill throne of Domnall mac Áedo, the current king's son. He was also responsible, according to Adomnán, for the ordination of Áedán as king of Dal Riata.⁶⁹

In his act of blessing the kingship of Áedán and in prophesying his succession, Columba illustrates an important aspect of the early relationship between church and state in both Iona and Northumbria. Charles-Edwards notes the similarities between the Ionan founder's actions and those of the Old Testament prophets. "What the story of Columba and Áedán mac Gabráin shows," he remarks, "is the transference of the role of blesser from the father designating an heir to the holy man—counterpart in the new dispensation of the prophet in the old—conferring divine legitimacy on a king's rule at its inauguration."⁷⁰ This same prophetic role is evident in the lives both of Aidan and of his Irish-trained successors. In his dealings with Oswald and later with Oswin, Lindisfarne's first bishop was the Northumbrian equivalent of "the voice of him that crieth in the wilderness."⁷¹ This phrase was used to describe the Old Testament prophet Isaiah, whose relationship to the Israelite kings approximated that between Aidan and his royal counterparts—neither one superior, neither one inferior, and both submissive to one

⁶⁸ Adomnán *LSC* I.49, II.6, in Sharpe, 151, 159. See also Sharpe, 27.

⁶⁹ Adomnán *LSC* I.10, III.5, in Sharpe, 120, 208-9.

⁷⁰ Charles-Edwards, 361. Adomnán's account, which suggests that Áedán was not the saint's first choice, places Columba in the guise of the prophet Samuel, and further reinforces the prophetic aspect of the Columban cleric. Adomnán *LSC* III.5, in Sharpe, 208-9.

⁷¹ Is. 40:3 KJV (King James Version).

another. The disappearance of this parity would be one of the most significant aspects of Wilfrid's coming episcopate, and would become the source of much of the conflict surrounding his career.

A great combination of forces served to create a strong bond between the royal and religious figures of Northumbria during Aidan's episcopate and for some years afterward. That so many of the influential leaders of the Church—such as Hild, Eanfled, and Aelfled at Whitby—were also members of the royal house was of great significance in this cohesive relationship. However, also significant were the personalities of both Oswald and Aidan, and the fact that the Northumbrian mission began as a partnership between the two. On one hand, the king's Christianity paved the way for Aidan's ministry, and on the other, the bishop's personality assured the king a religious agent who would present little threat to his authority. Subsequently, what began as a circumstantial, symbiotic encounter between two kindred spirits, became a part of Aidan's monastic bequest by way of the tradition he imported to Lindisfarne from Iona.

The Post-Whitby Northumbrian Episcopate

Aidan died in 651, to be succeeded by Finan and Colman, also Irishmen from Iona. Bede was apparently a devoted follower of neither: both of them played a large enough part in the Easter Controversy—in Bede's mind, from the wrong side—that the monk of Jarrow could not offer glowing praise to either one. He did, however, reveal in passing that Colman, the bishop who defended the Celtic-84 at the Synod of Whitby, was well loved by Oswy “for his innate discernment.” Bede also noted that Colman and his followers were “[s]o frugal and austere...that when they left the seat of their authority [following the synod in 664] there were very few buildings except the church; indeed, no

more than met the bare requirements of a seemly way of life.”⁷² During Colman’s time, then, there were continuing signs both of the asceticism and of the prophetic calling of the Columban Christian tradition evidenced in Aidan; it is significant that Bede felt obliged to honor these qualities even in the most intransigent enemies of the true Easter.

After the Synod of Whitby, however, there is a parting of the ways. Aidan’s tradition would continue in the ministry of men such as Cuthbert, while a type of episcopate new to Northumbria would appear in the activities of Wilfrid, the champion of Whitby, who attained his post in the wake of his synodal success. Both Bede and the author of Cuthbert’s anonymous *Life* depicted a man of strong eremitical tendencies who had to be forced to accept the episcopal grade, and who set it aside as soon as he could. Wilfrid, on the other hand, had no such qualms; once he entered the episcopal office, he embraced all that it entailed. Having experienced the grandeur of Rome, Wilfrid sought to imitate it at home, and having developed during his travels a deep appreciation for the prestige of the Church, he came to view the episcopate as the means whereby he might confer a bit of the Roman spirit upon the northern isles.

Characters in Contrast

One of Bede’s central purposes in writing the *Ecclesiastical History* has been identified as pastoral; in this context, Ian Bradley notes “his use of an idealised picture of a vanished golden age of Celtic Christianity to draw attention to the faults of the church of his own day.”⁷³ By the time he completed the *History*, Bede apparently perceived

⁷² The monk of Jarrow also indicates that until the time of Eadbert, a later abbot of Lindisfarne, these buildings were of wood. Bede *EH* III.26,25, in Sherley-Price, Latham, and Farmer, 193, 186.

⁷³ Bradley, 28.

around him an episcopacy which had forgotten its calling and a monastic vocation which had been drained of significance. Writing, shortly before his death, to Bishop Egbert of York, Bede bemoaned rumors of “certain bishops [who] serve Christ in such a way that they have no men of religion or continence with them,” and who enjoyed a coarse joke over a powerful homily. “Daily they feed the stomach on rich food,” he exclaimed, “rather than the soul on heavenly sacrifice.”⁷⁴ Having noted the problem, Bede in the pages of the *History* prescribed a remedy: “[d]espite emphatic repudiation of their position on the Paschal question, Bede made extensive use of Aidan, his successors and English trainees within that tradition as exemplars, whose reputations should, in the present, stimulate both veneration and imitation.”⁷⁵ Thomas Charles-Edwards notes that “[i]n Bede’s *Ecclesiastical History*, Wilfrid...takes an honoured place, but Aidan and Cuthbert were put forward as the supreme models that a bishop should follow.”⁷⁶

In Bede’s *Life of St. Cuthbert*, the ministry of Cuthbert is tied to that of Aidan from its very beginnings. While watching over his sheep one night, the young Cuthbert “saw a stream of light from the sky breaking in upon the darkness of the long night.” At the heart of this brilliance, “the choir of the heavenly host descended to the earth, and taking with them, without delay, a soul of exceeding brightness, returned to their heavenly home.”⁷⁷ The next morning, Cuthbert discovered the meaning of his vision:

⁷⁴ Bede, *Letter to Egbert*, in Sherley-Price, Latham, and Farmer, 339.

⁷⁵ N.J. Higham, *(Re-)Reading Bede: The Ecclesiastical History in Context* (London: Routledge, 2006), 144.

⁷⁶ Charles-Edwards, 343.

⁷⁷ Bede, *Life of St. Cuthbert IV*, in Bertram Colgrave, trans. and ed., *Two Lives of Saint Cuthbert: A Life by an Anonymous Monk of Lindisfarne and Bede’s Prose Life* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1940; reprint, 2007), 165-7. See also *Anonymous Life of St. Cuthbert I.v*, in Colgrave, *Two Lives*, 69.

And in the morning, learning that Aidan, bishop of the church at Lindisfarne, a man of specially great virtue, had entered the Kingdom of Heaven at the very time when he had seen him taken from the body, Cuthbert forthwith delivered to their owners the sheep which he was tending and decided to seek a monastery.⁷⁸

The connection which Bede evidently made between Cuthbert and Aidan as men of God has been honed and crystallized over the years into something similar to the mentor-disciple relationship of Paul and Timothy in the New Testament, or that of Elijah and Elisha in the Old. Alfred Fryer, writing in 1880, took this view, presenting the Northumbrian ministry of Cuthbert as the linear continuation of Aidan's:

But far away in Scotland a greater than Wilfrith or Eata was even then standing on the threshold of a glorious career, and preparing, though unconsciously to himself, to take up the great work of evangelisation where Aidan had laid it down. As the pious bishop passed from earth, his mantle descended, not on abbot or neophyte trained in the school of Lindisfarne, but on a humble shepherd, tending his flocks among the wild recesses of Lammermoor.⁷⁹

This link between the two Northumbrian churchmen is of great interest, since it is highly unlikely that Aidan and Cuthbert ever met, and, as far as is known, Cuthbert never set foot on Lindisfarne until well into adulthood. Wilfrid, on the other hand, having begun his career in the monastery on Lindisfarne during Aidan's tenure, has been described by many as the Benedict Arnold of the Celtic Christian world. Of his choice, after the Synod of Whitby, to be consecrated by Gallic rather than by English bishops, Alfred Fryer wrote: "A strange revolution must have been at work in Wilfrith's mind, which led him thus to seek ordination at the hands of a stranger, to the disparagement of those by whom he had been reared."⁸⁰ Edgar Gibson concurred, noting that in this

⁷⁸ Bede *LC IV*, in Colgrave, *Two Lives*, 167.

⁷⁹ Alfred C. Fryer, *Cuthberht of Lindisfarne: His Life and Times* (London: S.W. Partridge, 1880), 45.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 102.

episode “Wilfrid’s conduct appears in a peculiarly ungracious light.” It was apparently not sufficient for him to have achieved victory at the Synod of Whitby and chased the followers of Colman back to Iona; “he must further offer what seems to us a deliberate insult to all the English bishops, refusing consecration at their hands, and seeking it from French bishops beyond the sea.”⁸¹ Whereas Cuthbert’s ministry may be viewed in continuity with Aidan’s, there is strong evidence of a conscious break in Wilfrid’s mind between his present and the Celtic past.

There are two main reasons for Bede’s heightened focus on Cuthbert within the post-Whitby Northumbrian Church. To a person of the monk of Jarrow’s pastoral preoccupation, who both admired the Irish saints as paragons of Christian virtue and regretted their errors in reference to the proper celebration of Easter, Cuthbert represented the best of both worlds. He was a follower of the Dionysian Easter, and he lived his life according to the Irish tradition in which he had been trained.⁸² In one arresting phrase, the saint was described as “a linchpin, a bridge...between these two great traditions.”⁸³ Beyond this marriage of convenience, however, some have noted a more political purpose, especially in the context of Bede’s prose *Life* of the saint. Shortly after the

⁸¹ Gibson, 72.

⁸² “Lindisfarne’s promotion of the cult of St. Cuthbert is telling. On the surface, Aidan appears the more likely candidate as the focus of a saint-cult. While Aidan was bishop for seventeen years, Cuthbert led for less than two. In addition, Aidan ruled as bishop of all of Northumbria, but Cuthbert controlled only the diocese of Lindisfarne. On top of this, Aidan was the first to lead the community at Lindisfarne and most monasteries are associated with their founding saints. What made Cuthbert the better focus of a cult was the fact that while Aidan had always used the Celtic-84, Cuthbert had abandoned the alternative Celtic practices and was elected bishop twenty-one years after the Synod of Whitby. Thus it would be possible to present him as an orthodox saint.” Corning, 140. The *Anonymous Life of Cuthbert* attempts to make an earlier connection between Cuthbert and post-Whitby orthodoxy, claiming that he adopted the Petrine tonsure as early as his move from Melrose to Ripon in the 650s. See AC II.ii, in Colgrave, *Two Lives*, 77. However, most regard this as subterfuge on the hagiographer’s part. See Corning, 141.

⁸³ Robert Duncan, narr., in Kershaw, *Cuthbert*.

completion of Cuthbert's anonymous *Life*, Eddius Stephanus produced his *Life of Wilfrid*. Borrowings in this work from the previously published *Anonymous Life* suggest the possibility of literary thrust and parry, and that in this context the Lindisfarne community, which commissioned Bede's prose *Life of Cuthbert*, felt it incumbent upon themselves to respond in kind.⁸⁴ The heat apparent in this proposed interchange stemmed from a brief stint (687-8) of Wilfrid's as bishop of Lindisfarne, which according to all parties "was a disaster."⁸⁵ In the prose *Life*, Bede related that "after the man of God [Cuthbert] was buried [in 686], so great a blast of trial beat upon that church [the Lindisfarne community] that many of the brethren chose to depart from the place rather than be in the midst of such dangers." After a year had passed, however, and Eadbert had been installed in the diocese, "the storms and disturbances were driven away."⁸⁶ "[I]t is difficult," wrote Bertram Colgrave, "not to associate this with Wilfrid's government of the see; Wilfrid can hardly have loved the monastery which was the centre whence the Celtic 'heresy' had spread over the north."⁸⁷ Cuthbert, then, while identified in Bede with his predecessor Aidan, is used as a template against which Wilfrid may be judged and declared unworthy. While in the prose *Life* Cuthbert is presented as a hero, "a master of pastoral care both for the Lindisfarne community and the wider lay society," it is

⁸⁴ Corning, 143. See also Bede *LC* Preface, in Colgrave, *Two Lives*, 143.

⁸⁵ "His approach to the community of Aidan and Cuthbert appears to have been thoroughly confrontational." Charles-Edwards, 341.

⁸⁶ Bede *LC* XL, in Colgrave, *Two Lives*, 287.

⁸⁷ Bertram Colgrave, introduction to *Two Lives*, 9.

“subtly implicat[ed] that Wilfrid is the persecutor, the one who causes problems for Cuthbert and Lindisfarne.”⁸⁸

By this circuitous route, the post-Whitby era in the Northumbrian Church has passed on to subsequent generations largely in the form of a contest between these two personalities, an impression based in large part upon Bede’s odd silence concerning Wilfrid’s career after 664.⁸⁹ Many have noted in this respect a certain reserve on Bede’s part toward the life and career of Wilfrid, and Caitlin Corning suggests that this was due to the fact that Bede’s concept of the episcopacy and Wilfrid’s were diametrically opposed:

One reason for Bede’s silence about Wilfrid’s episcopacy is that the bishop was continually at odds with the Northumbrian secular and ecclesiastical hierarchy. His career highlights the factions within the Northumbrian Church and the political maneuvering behind many events, something that Bede minimizes. In the *History*, Bede usually portrays the Northumbrian secular and ecclesiastical leadership working together to promote the good of the Church.

In addition, Bede believed that bishops should live simple lives, dedicated above all to pastoral care. Wilfrid’s building large stone churches, his many retainers, his desire to keep Northumbria as a single diocese—something Bede saw as incompatible with good pastoral care—were all at odds with Bede’s model of a good bishop.⁹⁰

The contrast drawn by Bede between Cuthbert and Wilfrid, then, is further proof that a fundamental shift was occurring within the workings of the Northumbrian Church,

⁸⁸ Corning, 143.

⁸⁹ “Except for the Synod of Whitby narrative, Bede tends to underplay Wilfrid’s influence in Northumbria. While Wilfrid was an important bishop for over forty-five years, his political and ecclesiastical involvement in Northumbria is often unclear or simply not mentioned in the *History*....Only four chapters actually discuss events of his life in any depth: two discuss events surrounding Whitby and Wilfrid’s appointment to the episcopacy, one is focused on his efforts to convert the south Saxons, and the last is a general overview of his life. All of this can be contrasted with Bede’s focus on Cuthbert even within the *History*. Although Cuthbert was bishop for only two years, and only bishop of Lindisfarne, Bede includes six chapters that focus on his career and miracles.” Ibid., 146.

⁹⁰ Ibid. See also Farmer, notes to *EH*, in Sherley-Price, Latham, and Farmer, 374; Brown, 363; Bertram Colgrave, trans. and ed., introduction to *The Life of Bishop Wilfrid by Eddius Stephanus* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1927), xii.

stemming largely from Wilfrid's episcopal sensibilities; it is a line of demarcation between two very different ideas of what it meant to be a bishop. Even in Stephanus' *Life*, than which it would be difficult to find a more partisan piece of hagiography, Wilfrid's ambition, which starkly distinguishes his career from those of his predecessors, is impossible to overlook.⁹¹ It is interesting that Cuthbert, in his two years in the episcopate, spent his time in an attempt to get out, while Wilfrid, in his forty-five, was occupied during most of that time with the business of getting back in.

The contrast between Bishops Cuthbert and Wilfrid, according to William Trent Foley, arises from each one's understanding of human sanctity. "For both," he writes, "sanctity implied imitating Christ and such Christ-types as the prophet, apostle, and martyr." For Cuthbert, however, having been trained by the Irish, this last denotes "a Christlike suffering that may take almost any form, including such voluntary forms as bodily renunciation and pilgrimage." On the other hand, Wilfrid seems to have embraced a much more literal meaning of martyrdom; for him, "[t]o be a martyr...is to suffer persecution and death because of one's Christlike witness to the power of God."⁹² This point of view was a direct result, claims Foley, of Wilfrid's experiences on the Continent and in Rome, where he came into direct contact with martyrdom in various forms, both past and present. During his first visit to Rome, at a relatively young age, Wilfrid was depicted by Stephanus paying "daily visits to the shrines of the saints."⁹³ On the return journey from this first Roman venture, while staying in the household of Annemundus,

⁹¹ Colgrave, introduction to *Life of Wilfrid*, xi.

⁹² William Trent Foley, *Images of Sanctity in Eddius Stephanus' Life of Bishop Wilfrid, an Early English Saint's Life* (Lewiston, UK: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1992), 110-11.

⁹³ Eddius Stephanus, *Life of Wilfrid* 5, in *The Age of Bede*, trans. and ed. J.F. Webb and D.H. Farmer, rev. ed. (London: Penguin Books, 1998), 112.

Archbishop of Lyons, the young Wilfrid witnessed first-hand a Christian's willingness to die for the Gospel: Queen Baldhild, wrote Stephanus, "just like Jezebel who killed the prophets of old," commanded the execution of nine bishops, among whose number was Wilfrid's patron, Annemundus.⁹⁴ This brought the concept of martyrdom home to Wilfrid in a way that life in Northumbria, which "could hold up for him a proud heritage of ascetic saints and pilgrims, but comparatively few martyrs," could never have done.⁹⁵ Foley's argument is compelling: it explains the rationale behind Wilfrid's chronic bouts of conflict with both secular and religious authorities during his episcopal career. He threw himself into precarious situations in the same way that second and third-century Christians marched up to the gates of the Circus and demanded the lions.

Also during his continental forays, Wilfrid discovered the importance of pomp and circumstance, argues Foley. "As bishop," he explains, "Cuthbert wielded immense authority, but not by virtue of his office. His authority derived rather from his personal charisma, and that, in turn, derived from his ascetic humility. Becoming bishop changed nothing."⁹⁶ The same may be said of the episcopate of Aidan. Wilfrid was a different story; although he "admire[d] the ascetic's qualities and even cultivate[d] them to a certain extent in himself, he seem[ed] to understand that his episcopal office require[d] much more of him than the cultivation of ascetic virtue."⁹⁷ This new sensibility, again, stemmed from the time he spent in Rome and Lyons:

⁹⁴ Eddius Stephanus *LW* 6, in Webb and Farmer, 113.

⁹⁵ Foley, 77.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 119.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 120.

The bishops that the historical Wilfrid observed at Rome and Lyon in the 650s wielded immense worldly power and wealth. However much charisma they possessed in their persons, they labored arduously and even suffered death in order to ground religious authority in a charisma that rested not in persons, but in such suprapersonal institutions as church, episcopacy, priesthood, and canon law. Although these suprapersonal institutions do not inspire or attract in the same way that a single charismatic person might, history has shown that they have helped offer the church a firmer foundation by which it has been able to withstand internal and external assaults upon it. Because there is no guarantee that the church will, in every generation, give birth to such extraordinarily charismatic figures as Cuthbert or Aidan or that it will forever enjoy the cooperation of secular rulers, the survival of the church as a social institution requires that it invest itself in an authority which can withstand the ravages of time and time's unforeseeable vicissitudes.⁹⁸

When in Rome, argues Foley, Wilfrid learned to do as the Romans, which implied the investment of the episcopal office with a power which transcended the walls of the cathedral church and worked its way into the secular foundations of society. While Foley's treatment of Wilfrid seems to assign too much of the saint's ambition to the preservation of the faith and perhaps not enough to the preservation of his own fortunes, it does pave the way to a better understanding of Wilfrid's tempestuous career as a Northumbrian bishop.

Wilfrid and the State

In his early years in the episcopate, "[t]he historical Wilfrid was trying to establish just such an authority [as he had encountered in Rome] on which the young English churches could rest."⁹⁹ His willingness to engage in conflict is evident from his return to Northumbria after his first Roman pilgrimage: his involvement in the Easter Controversy demonstrated the extent to which he would risk clashing with his fellow

⁹⁸ Foley, 120-1.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 121.

ecclesiastics in the interests of the Church. Ironically, Wilfrid's early emphasis seems to have been not far different from Bede's: both hailed a resolution to the Easter quarrel as the surest path to unity within the universal Church. In this guise, Wilfrid's ambitions presented little threat to royal authority. On the contrary, Oswy decided in favor of Wilfrid's argument at Whitby based at least in part on its potential undergirding of his own political status vis-à-vis his son Ahlfrith.¹⁰⁰ Very soon, however, the saint's ambitions, both personal and in regard to the Church, would take a sharp left turn which would create all manner of friction between himself and the Northumbrian leadership.

Shortly after Wilfrid in 669 secured the expulsion of Chad from his promised see of York, Stephanus subtly hinted at the beginning of conflict between the saint and Ecgfrith, king of Northumbria. At first, he wrote, "[t]he pious King Ecgfrith [who assumed the throne in 670] and Queen Aethilthryth were both obedient to Bishop Wilfrid in everything, and their reign was marked by fruitful years of peace and joy at home and victory over their enemies." Then, more cryptically, he remarked: "While [Ecgfrith] was on good terms with the bishop, as many will tell you, he enlarged his kingdom by many victories; but when they quarrelled and the queen separated herself from him to give herself to God, the king's triumphs ceased, and that within his own lifetime."¹⁰¹ For once, Bede is more forthcoming than Stephanus concerning the details of Wilfrid's career: the monk of Jarrow informed his readers that Aethilthryth (Etheldreda) had been married once before she was wed to Ecgfrith, but had nevertheless maintained her virginity throughout her life. Bede hails this as reason for veneration, and even includes

¹⁰⁰ See pp. 68-70, above.

¹⁰¹ Eddius Stephanus *LW* 19, in Webb and Farmer, 127-8.

in the *History* a hymn in her honor; the king, however, does not appear to have shared his enthusiasm. Several times the queen begged her husband to grant her permission to remove to a convent, “and having at length obtained his reluctant consent,” she retired to the community at Coldingham. Here, noted Bede, “she received the veil and clothing of a nun from the hands of Bishop Wilfrid.”¹⁰² The beginning of Ecgfrith’s stormy relations with Wilfrid, then, came down to a very simple issue: the bishop had absconded with his wife.¹⁰³

While this incident easily may be set down to a lack of judgment on Wilfrid’s part, it does reveal a new development in episcopal behavior. Aidan, by Bede’s account, had been to a degree part of Oswald’s inner circle, but he is portrayed more as a friend and spiritual counsellor than as someone to be obeyed. Cuthbert was from time to time sought out for prophetic advice, as in the case of Aelfled’s query concerning the royal fortunes of Ecgfrith. Neither of them, however, so far as is known, ever interfered directly in the private affairs of a king, even less in the underhanded fashion apparently adopted in Aethilthryth’s case by Wilfrid. The office of bishop in this way for the first time in Northumbria intruded on the prerogatives of a king, and Ecgfrith felt it strongly.

The next step in the escalation of conflict was fairly obvious. The course of Ecgfrith’s military progress, Stephanus wrote, served also to enlarge considerably Wilfrid’s diocese; “[h]e was now bishop of the Saxons in the south and of the British, Scots, and Picts to the north,” a territory which rivalled that of king.¹⁰⁴ Theodore, by that

¹⁰² Bede *EH* IV.19-20, in Sherley-Price, Latham, and Farmer, 236, 239-40. See also D.H. Farmer, introduction to Webb and Farmer, 24.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, 24-5.

¹⁰⁴ Eddius Stephanus *LW* 21, in Webb and Farmer, 129.

time archbishop in Canterbury, had begun in 673 at the Synod of Hertford the process of diocesan division in Britain; in 678, he turned to the territories overseen by Wilfrid, an “area [which] was obviously far too large for one bishop to care for it adequately as a pastor.” Egfrith, who since the flight of Aethilthryth had remarried, and whose new queen, Ermenburga, was no supporter of Wilfrid’s, saw in Theodore’s initiative a chance at retaliation. “Egfrith,” explained D.H. Farmer, “wished to be rid of Wilfrid and Theodore wished to divide his diocese, with or without Wilfrid’s consent.” This convergence of intentions drew king and prelate into a temporary partnership, and the saint was effectively expelled from his see.¹⁰⁵

In order to understand properly Wilfrid’s next move, one must also understand the importance in his mind of the Church’s property and its necessarily inalienable quality. In the intervening years between Wilfrid’s consecration and expulsion, he had devoted a great deal of time and money to the construction of several magnificent stone churches, most notably those at York, Ripon, and Hexham. This was, according to Charles-Edwards, a work of “conscious *Romanitas*”; Stephanus noted the divine inspiration which must have gone into the erection of the church at Hexham, “for we have never heard of its like this side of the Alps.”¹⁰⁶ No expense was spared in the construction of these churches, and Foley sees them as holding a sacramental position in Wilfrid’s mind:

Behind such elaborate building plans lies a strongly sacramental understanding of the physical church structure itself. According to that understanding, the church and its decor function as earthly windows opening up to the heavenly realm: the stone walls of the physical church recall the invisible church’s fortress-like character and its rock-solid apostolic foundation, against which the powers of

¹⁰⁵ Farmer, introduction to Webb and Farmer, 24-5. See also Eddius Stephanus *LW* 24, in Webb and Farmer, 131-3.

¹⁰⁶ Charles-Edwards, 329; Eddius Stephanus *LW* 22, in Webb and Farmer, 130.

death will not prevail; the gold and silver that gild the martyr's shrine signify the martyr's dazzling merits, through which Satan's mischief is confounded.¹⁰⁷

How effective, then, was a wall erected against the sorties of Satan if the whim of a king could knock it down?

Even in Stephanus, there is some indication that the saint's indignation was not entirely on behalf of the gospel, but it is likely that he also detected in the joint actions of the king and the archbishop a clear and present danger to the prestige of the English Church.¹⁰⁸ To whom, ultimately, did the land on which the monasteries and churches were built truly belong—to God or to the king? Who determined the extent and duration of a bishop's see, and who decided who was to fill it? Even Theodore, sent to Britain to champion the Roman cause, came under Wilfrid's attack, because in his appeal to Ecgfrith on these matters he seemed to suggest that the Church's affairs could be ordered according to secular authority.¹⁰⁹ If Foley is correct, and Wilfrid's intention in Northumbria was to place the Church on a footing unsusceptible to the fluctuations of secular goodwill, the ease with which Ecgfrith divorced Wilfrid from his property must have been disconcerting.

Faced with this threat to church sovereignty (and to his own position), Wilfrid made the only decision he knew to make: "having lost the king's favor, [he] appealed to

¹⁰⁷ Foley, 124.

¹⁰⁸ It is difficult not to detect some measure of personal concern in Wilfrid's statements that "his enemies [were] behav[ing] like robbers and defraud[ing] him of all the wealth which the kings, for their love of God, had left him." Eddius Stephanus *LW* 24, in Webb and Farmer, 132.

¹⁰⁹ Of Theodore's involvement in Wilfrid's expulsion, Stephanus wrote: "They secured Archbishop Theodore to further criminal folly, winning him over with bribes, for money will blind even the wisest. Theodore came to them and heard them explain that they intended to humiliate Wilfrid. Without the least excuse he agreed to condemn him although he was completely blameless." *Ibid.*, 132. It is evident that, at least in Stephanus' mind, the main parties to this crime were Ecgfrith and his men, and Theodore was their willful pawn.

the Pope against his virtual deposition without any canonical cause. In so doing, Wilfrid made history, for it was the first time that such an appeal had been made from England.”¹¹⁰ In his flight to Rome Wilfrid is revealed at the height of his offense, not once but twice. Not only the king, but the archbishop as well, took offense at Wilfrid’s insinuation of an authority higher than their own. In 702, at the Synod of Austerfield, Berhtwald (who had compounded Theodore’s error by becoming the second archbishop to ignore Rome’s instructions and give in to royal demands) joined Aldfrith, Ecgrith’s successor, in declaring Wilfrid guilty of obstinacy by virtue of his “preferring their [the Roman officials’] judgement to ours.”¹¹¹

During his tenure in Northumbria, between his several exiles, Wilfrid introduced many novelties into the religious life. His speech at Austerfield captures this best:

After the death of those elders whom Pope Gregory sent us, was I not the first to root out from the Church the foul weeds planted by the Scots? Did I not convert the whole Northumbrian nation to celebrating Easter at the proper time as the Holy See demanded, and to having the proper Roman tonsure in the form of a crown instead of your old way of shaving the back of the head from the top down? Did I not teach you to chant according to the practice of the early Church, with two choirs singing alternately, but simultaneously for responsories and antiphons and doing the responses and chants together antiphonally? Did I not bring the monastic life into line with the Rule of St. Benedict never before introduced into these parts?¹¹²

This was, according to Charles-Edwards, all part of a concerted campaign on Wilfrid’s part “to remove the Irish tares from Northumbrian wheatfields.”¹¹³ None of these “Roman” innovations, however, sparked any response from the Northumbrian kings; like

¹¹⁰ Farmer, introduction to Webb and Farmer, 25.

¹¹¹ Eddius Stephanus *LW* 47, in Webb and Farmer, 158.

¹¹² *Ibid.*, 158.

¹¹³ Charles-Edwards, 326.

Constantine before them, their interest in theology appears to have been limited to its unifying power within their kingdom. Once Wilfrid's invention strayed beyond the spiritual into the secular and the renovation of the Church began to impinge upon the rights and authority of the throne, the rulers' attitudes changed quickly.

Wilfrid's actions also revealed an unsuspected ambivalence on the part of the hierarchy in Canterbury toward the authority of the Roman See. Theodore, sent to Britain by Pope Vitalian in 668, might reasonably be expected to uphold the Roman right more consistently than most. However, he came from Tarsus in Cilicia, and Vitalian felt a need to send with him an abbot of Naples, Hadrian, "to ensure that he did not introduce into the Church which he was to rule any Greek customs which conflicted with the teachings of the true faith."¹¹⁴ In other words, the pope sent a potential heretic to clean up after a purported heresy. When one considers also the archbishop's precarious position, poised between royal indignation and religious inclination, both Theodore's and Berhtwald's behavior begins to make perfect sense.

Twice Wilfrid appealed to Rome, and twice the papal pronouncements were ignored. In the end, at the Synod of Nidd in 706, he was readmitted to a fraction of his original estate. To Stephanus, Wilfrid's reinstatement is a great victory: the decision of the synod "to us...brought new hope and restored to us all the joys of our old way of life."¹¹⁵ However, the greater implications of Wilfrid's appeal to Rome over the heads of local religious and secular authorities were far-reaching. His actions threw the archbishopric into limbo, suspending its occupant between an irate king and his divinely

¹¹⁴ Bede *EH* IV.1, in Sherley-Price, Latham, and Farmer, 203, 202-6

¹¹⁵ Eddius Stephanus *LW* 61, in Webb and Farmer, 176.

ordained superior; his position must have been a difficult one in which to find oneself, since there was no possible answer which would appease all parties. Most significantly, the rapport between church and state which had characterized the Northumbrian situation since the arrival of Aidan was brought to an abrupt end.

Conclusion

The seeds of this conflict were planted not at the Synod of Whitby or in the context of the Easter Controversy, but in the fifth- and sixth-century development, within the Irish Church, of a unique segmentation of abbatial and episcopal authority. This in turn led to the development of two distinct conceptions of the episcopate: one functional, one official. The former traveled with Aidan from Iona to Northumbria in 635; the latter arrived with Wilfrid upon his return from his first Roman pilgrimage. Oswy's decision at Whitby, based as it was on the authority of Peter (and by extension that of Rome), gave pride of place to Wilfrid's Roman understanding of the role of the bishop and, unwittingly, to Rome itself. The king himself had suggested that Peter's authority carried decisive weight in Britain. It was only a matter of time before someone reminded him of it.

It is Foley's opinion that Wilfrid returned to Northumbria intent upon lifting the English Church above the waterline of rising and receding temporal humors, and to place it on a higher ground of its own making. In so doing, however, Wilfrid could not escape the need to erect an alternative authority that might rival a king's. From his interference into Ecgfrith's household affairs, to his heightened appreciation of Church properties, to his willingness to look beyond English borders to the authority of the pope, Wilfrid's career presented a stark contrast to that of Aidan, and it presented a developing threat to

the Northumbrian kings. As long as affiliation with the papacy assured their political stability—as in Oswy’s decision to embrace the Dionysian Easter—it was a small price for the kings to pay. Once Wilfrid decided to push that affiliation through to its logical conclusion, the partnership between church and throne which had been such an integral element in the growth of the Northumbrian Church was turned upside down.

CHAPTER FIVE

Conclusion

The New Romans

In the mythology of popular Celtic Christianity, the Synod of Whitby has achieved an iconic status: it is understood as the messianic convergence, so to speak, in the *heilsgeschichte* of the Celtic Christian Church. As such, it is an appropriate centerpiece in the ongoing debate concerning the particulars of this period of religious history. The supposed conflict between Celt and Christendom which led to the synodal clash of 664—the disdain with which Wilfrid viewed his Irish opponents and the vehemence with which they returned the sentiment—mirrors a similar tendency on the part of opposing factions in the present dispute. In this case, the new Celts, advocates of the Christianity of their predecessors, are faced with a new Rome, an army of scholars seemingly determined completely to undermine the faith of the Celtic Fathers. Just as Colman, champion of the Irish at Whitby, “having no doubt” that his Irish forebears were indeed saints, swore that he would “never cease to emulate their lives, customs, and discipline,” adherents of Celtic Christianity today seem to make it a point of honor to defend their spiritual heroes against the depredations of the academy.¹

Academics, however, are not the only inheritors of the Roman stigma; ultimately, the current conflict is an image of its imagined ancestor, pitting one church against

¹ Bede, *Ecclesiastical History of the English People* III.25, in Leo Sherley-Price, R.E. Latham, and D.H. Farmer, trans. and ed., *Ecclesiastical History of the English People with Bede's Letter to Egbert and Cuthbert's Letter on the Death of Bede*, rev. ed. (London: Penguin Books, 1990), 191.

another. Patrick, the traditional founder of Celtic Christianity, has been praised as a man of God who “gave himself to people about whom the institutional church of the fifth century seemed unconcerned”; in other sources, he is pictured presiding over a congregational system of churches which, far from the central authority of Rome, showed “no hint of dependence on any organization or authority outside of the Celtic Christian community.”² According to George Hunter, the Celtic Church was “more of a movement than an institution”: it was “more imaginative and less cerebral,” a form of spirituality in which “there was no room for religiosity.”³ Each of these interpretations are indicative of a Christianity defined by a siege mentality. The ubiquity of Celtic imagery and mythology in the “emerging” movement of the new millennium is best understood in the context of a church called to the carpet on a regular basis, forced to defend itself and its *raison d’être* against the encroachments of an “existing” institution which, to the mind of one who knows the Celtic Christian myth, bears an uncanny resemblance to the medieval “Romanizers” who were so apparently eager to suppress their Celtic brethren.

Fanning the flames of this antagonistic bonfire is a superficial assessment of the Synod of Whitby, its context, and its implications for Celtic Christianity as a whole. This assessment rests largely upon three foundational principles, each of which has been challenged in the preceding pages. First, an image—based largely upon the nineteenth-

² Scott A. Bessenecker, *The New Friars: The Emerging Movement Serving the World’s Poor* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, IVP Books, 2006), 101. “While the believers looked to Patrick as their leader, Christ was regarded as the ‘head’ of his people. Each bishop was apparently the pastor of his congregation, appointed so by Patrick when the believers were first grouped together.” The author’s implication is that this “Pauline” model of the episcopacy is more attuned to New Testament practices than the “monarchical episcopacy” advocated by Rome. Leslie Hardinge, *The Celtic Church in Britain* (London: SPCK, 1972; reprint, New York: TEACH Services, 2005), 125, 132.

³ George G. Hunter III, *The Celtic Way of Evangelism: How Christianity Can Reach the West...Again* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2000); Pat Robson, ed., introduction to *A Celtic Liturgy* (London: HarperCollins Publishers, 2000), x.

century inventions of Ernest Renan, Matthew Arnold, and Alexander Carmichael—has been developed of a simple Celtic faith, unconcerned with petty doctrinal squabbles and somehow suprainstitutional, over against a hardened Roman shell of dogma and dictatorial inclinations. According to this construction, the Synod of Whitby was defined not by its content, but by its intent; this was, according to the popular myth, quite simply to seize control of the Northumbrian Church from its Celtic leadership and assimilate it into the power structure of Rome. Beginning, however, at the beginning, one discovers a deep theological concern underlying Celtic participation in the Easter Controversy: from Columbanus' efforts to communicate his concerns to the papacy (during the Victorian phase of the conflict) to the mutual accusations of “dark” Easter celebrations in the years surrounding the gathering at Whitby (during the Dionysian phase), the supporters of the Celtic-84 table demonstrated both a keen interest in and a solid understanding of the doctrine, practice, and traditions of the early medieval Church. It has also been demonstrated that the debate over the Easter question was far from a mere squabble or subterfuge; instead, it dealt with an issue of the utmost importance to the medieval Christian mind. As addressing an issue of such destructive potential, both to the unity of the Church and to its faith, it is overly cynical to reduce the Dionysian defense to the prestige in some Roman sleight-of-hand. A part, at least, of that party's stated intentions might better be taken at face value.

Stemming from this first false principle is the second: it is a central tenet of the Celtic Christian myth that the Synod of Whitby marked the end of the Celtic Church. This is quite demonstrably untrue. The Synod of Whitby was a stopover on the path to Christian unity behind a shared Easter tradition, which in the event came to be based

upon the table crafted by Dionysius Exiguus. Not until the British (Welsh and Cornish) adoption of that Easter table in the latter half of the eighth century, a full one hundred years after the supposedly decisive Synod of Whitby, did that process reach its conclusion. If by “Celtic Church” one means those who stood in support of the Celtic Easter, then their continued resistance to the alternate calculation is well attested in the extant sources. Even, however, if one’s definition of the “Celtic Church” is more narrow and less semantically specific, referent only to those Northumbrian clerics whose Christian training was undertaken in an Irish rather than a continental or Roman context, there is still evidence of that tradition’s continued presence in Northumbria in the years following the synod. The evidence suggests that many churchmen who celebrated Easter according to the Celtic-84 prior to the Synod of Whitby, rather than accompanying Colman in his exodus to Ireland, chose to adapt to the new practice and continue in their Northumbrian posts, without abandoning completely their Celtic heritage.

Both of these tottering tenets are built upon a foundation which is itself less than firm. The Celtic Church, it is claimed in the popular myth, was a creature unto itself; forced at first by circumstance, but later by choice, it developed in total isolation from the balance of Christendom, and it was in this hothouse environment that the conflict which came to a head at Whitby began its development. Again, though, the actual content of the Synod of Whitby has been ignored: as part of the ongoing Easter Controversy, whatever conflict which played out at that gathering stemmed from a doctrinal disagreement which began not in Ireland, but in Gaul during Columbanus’ ministry on the continent. Furthermore, in the work of Patrick in fifth-century Ireland and Columbanus in sixth- and seventh-century Gaul and Italy, the student discovers “Celtic”

Christians who considered themselves very much a part of the broader medieval Church: the former as the harbinger of its evangelical fulfillment at the world's known edge, the latter as the mediator of its doctrinal disputes, Easter-related and otherwise. Finally, the process whereby the Irish penitentials were developed and transmitted to the wider Church—adopting from Gaul the principles of Cassian and returning them to Gaul via Columbanus in a fully developed penitential format—demonstrates a symbiotic relationship between the insular and continental Churches at the very moment when the popular myth has them at arms' length. Scholars slowly, since the 1980s, have been chipping away at this notion of complete separation between the Church of the Isles and that of the continent, to the point even of questioning the propriety of a specifically “Celtic” conceptualization of British and Irish Christianity.

If, however, ask the adherents of the Celtic Christian myth, the insular and continental Churches inhabited Christendom in cooperation rather than in conflict, and if the gathering in 664 did not signal the overthrow of one tradition and its replacement by another, how does one explain the obvious changes which took place within the Northumbrian Church in the years following the Synod of Whitby? The outbreak of underhandedness, excommunications, and quarreling seem to the proponents of the myth to be proof of the effect of a new, imperialistic Roman control over the Northumbrian Church. These changes, however, were an indirect, rather than a direct, result of the Synod of Whitby; they had little to do with the Easter question addressed at the synod or with increased interaction between the Roman and Northumbrian Churches. Rather, they stemmed from a new interaction between Rome and the Northumbrian state, in the person and episcopal sensibilities of Wilfrid, whose rise to prominence came on the coattails of

Oswy's synod. His emergence in the Northumbrian Church as a political as well as a spiritual leader, and his willingness to assign to the papal prerogative a higher authority than had the royal, created a tension between the throne and the Church which previously had not been part of the Northumbrian religious experience.

The picture of intertraditional antagonism which serves as the conceptual underpinning for a great deal of the popular Celtic Christian myth is itself, therefore, a myth. The major change wrought by the Synod of Whitby, outside of the immediate question of Easter celebration, was in the field of politics rather than that of religion. For the first time, the Anglo-Saxon rulers found themselves in direct contact with an alternative power structure and, in Wilfrid, with a cleric who did not hesitate to seek it out. While a suggestion of causality would be too great a leap, it is interesting to note that, in the greater scheme of history, Wilfrid's clash with the Northumbrian royalty stands as the earliest thread in a pattern of antagonistic relations between English rulers and the Roman hierarchy. It appears that later rulers discovered that which occurred to Oswy's successors as they dealt with Wilfrid: while the authority of Peter was fine in theory, in practice it became another matter altogether.

In most sources dealing with the Easter Controversy, Wilfrid is presented at the Synod of Whitby as the defender of the Roman Easter, and his faction is identified as the Roman party. This is done in the interests of simplifying the narrative, but in reality it tends to complicate the situation. While Rome did by 664 follow the Dionysian Easter, it was not the only place which did so; moreover, the table crafted by Dionysius was not proprietary to Rome, but was instead a product of the eastern branch of the Church. The Victorian table, which had been commissioned by the papacy, had been abandoned as

faulty long before Oswy's synod. It is, then, not entirely accurate to refer to the Dionysian Easter as the Roman Easter, or to refer to Wilfrid's following as a Roman party—at least before 664.

After the Synod of Whitby, circumstances changed. While the Easter issue was not finally resolved until the Synod of Hertford in 673, Bede informed his readers that the supporters of the Celtic-84 Easter table departed Northumbria en masse in the company of Colman immediately after Whitby. For all practical purposes, the contest between the Celtic-84 and Dionysian Easters (in Northumbria) ended in 664. As those contestants left the arena, though, another set took their place, this time facing off not with fellow religious, but with the Northumbrian royals Ecgfrith and Aldfrith. Instead of opposing theological interpretations, two alternative power bases, the English and the Roman, were pitted against one another. These were the new Romans, and the new Romans were the true Romans, devoid of any paschal connotations and focused solely on asserting Roman temporal authority in the Northumbrian kingdom. In truth, the emergence of Wilfrid's Roman party did not lead to the Synod of Whitby; instead, the Synod of Whitby made possible the emergence of Wilfrid's Roman party.

The New Celts

A storm is breaking over Lindisfarne. Desolation gives way to breathtaking wonderment: the clouds are rent asunder by a host of frantic sunbeams, eager to escape from their gray prison and dance in freedom upon the sapphire-sparkling waters. Standing at the edge of the Heugh, a singular promontory at the southwest corner of the island, the curious onlooker is greeted by a mirror image of himself. In the distance, a twin eminence emerges from the receding mist. It is the Rock of Bamburgh, the peak

upon which once stood the seventh-century wooden ramparts of Oswald of Northumbria. In that instant, time throws off its linearity and an enormous weight of souls crashes down upon the unwary pilgrim, stranding him momentarily between realities. Suddenly, Aidan stands at his side, gazing in unison at the stronghold across the bay.

Such is the stuff of the contemporary Celtic Christian experience. The myth has created a new reality, highly romantic and slightly out of phase with the world around it. That it does not necessarily hold up under the rigors of historical inquiry does not, however, render this new reality any less authentic to those who invented it. Ernest Renan, near the end of the nineteenth century, wondered what the future would hold for the Celtic spirit:

After having put in practice all chivalries, devout and worldly, gone with Peredur in quest of the Holy Grail and fair ladies, and dreamed with St. Brandan of mystical Atlantides, who knows what [the Celtic imagination] would produce in the domain of intellect, if it hardened itself to an entrance into the world, and subjected its rich and profound nature to the conditions of modern thought? It appears to me that there would result from this combination, productions of high originality, a subtle and discreet manner of taking life, a singular union of strength and weakness, of rude simplicity and mildness.⁴

The scholar would do well to heed Renan's words before dismissing out of hand the cultural phenomenon that is Celtic Christianity today. These are the new Celts, and their mythology has been developed for a purpose, in response to a felt need, both in the church and in society. No recent contribution to the Christian faith has been more creative or sought more eagerly a workable synthesis between the demands of the twenty-first century and the spirituality of the seventh—and it has yielded notable results. It is

⁴ Ernest Renan, "The Poetry of the Celtic Races," in William G. Hutchison, trans. and ed., *The Poetry of the Celtic Races, and Other Essays by Ernest Renan*, The Scott Library 100 (London: The Walter Scott Publishing Co., n.d.), 59.

not, then, for the historian to decide whether or not the Celtic Christian myth is true or false. To its proponents it is real, and that, ultimately, is what matters.

Nevertheless, it also would be wise for these “new Celts” to pay greater mind to the contributions of their academic counterparts. Celtic Christianity is hailed by some as a potential “tool for the revitalization of moribund Christian faith and its institutions.”⁵ The clash at Whitby between the “authentic” (Celtic) church and the “institutional” (Roman) church is a convenient episode in this respect, and it has become for many a paradigm by which the relationship between the emerging and existing churches may be defined. In this system, the synod represents (in the person of Wilfrid) the existing church’s suspected attempts to undermine the progress of the emergent trends in postmodern ecclesiology, and (in the person of Colman) the rejection, by participants in those trends, of their institutional roots. The “pure” faith of the Celts seems to many to offer a panacea for the problems of a decaying Church, a Church which is increasingly out of touch with the contemporary world. “Society,” remarks Ray Simpson, the founder of the Community of Aidan and Hilda, “is redefining itself: if the church fails to redefine itself, it ceases to be relevant to society.”⁶

The role played here by the Synod of Whitby, which is based upon the Celtic myth rather than upon the historical reality, carries both constructive and destructive potential. On one hand, the impetus provided by an awareness of the need to oppose complacency in the Church has led Simpson and others like him, as Renan predicted, into

⁵ “Christian leaders are therefore ‘buying in’ to ‘Celtic Christianity,’ apparently in the hope that it will fan the dying sparks of postmodern faith.” Donald E. Meek, *The Quest for Celtic Christianity* (Edinburgh: The Handsel Press, 2000), 2.

⁶ Ray Simpson, “Does the Future Have a Church?”, The Forrester Lecture, St. Andrews University, March 14, 2005; available at http://www.aidanandhilda.org.uk/public_html/downloads/forrester_lecture.pdf (accessed October 11, 2008), 1 of 8.

highly creative areas of ecclesiological innovation. At the same time, however, the comparison between the medieval situation of the Celts and that of postmodern Christians today can be a highly divisive one, because it seems to indicate that new and old church models must be continually and irremediably at odds with one another. This is a harmful argument, which would benefit greatly from the efforts that have been made in recent historical scholarship to understand better what actually took place in the Northumbrian state in the years surrounding the Synod of Whitby. In the future, the emerging/existing debate will be served best by those who are able both to appreciate the Celtic Christian myth on its own merits, while at the same time tempering the myth by means of the careful examination of historical fact.

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