



CHRIST IN CELTIC CHRISTIANITY

Britain and Ireland from the Fifth to the Tenth Century

MICHAEL W. HERREN AND SHIRLEY ANN BROWN

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CHRIST IN CELTIC CHRISTIANITY:
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FROM THE FIFTH TO THE
TENTH CENTURY

MICHAEL W. HERREN AND SHIRLEY ANN BROWN

THE BOYDELL PRESS

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PROLOGUE

If a book can be inspired by a song, this one was inspired by ‘Is that all there is?’, famously sung by Miss Peggy Lee. While this book is not about existential *angst*, the question of the song’s title is aptly posed with regard to Celtic Christianity, and more generally to Insular Christianity in the early middle ages. From Bede to historians of the twenty-first century it has been widely accepted that Christians in the early British and Irish Churches were wholly orthodox in matters of faith. The questions debated were confined to ‘practical issues’ such as Easter tables, equinoxes, epacts, consecrations, triple immersions and tonsures. To be sure, these issues caused plenty of trouble in their day, but to persons living in the twenty-first century, including those still seriously interested in the history of Christianity, they look like a tempest in a teapot. Is that all there *was*?

This book began with the project of defining the images of Christ that were prevalent in the British Isles, and more specifically in Celtic Britain and Ireland from the fifth century to the tenth. It became apparent that one could not achieve this goal simply by looking at poems and pictures without an ideological context for their interpretation. The most fundamental task was to investigate the character of Christian theology prevalent in Britain and Ireland from the fifth to the tenth century, and to look for continuity and change. But how could this be achieved if there was no theology to study, but only epacts and haircuts? Is that all there *was*?

Previous speculation regarding the spiritual roots of Celtic Christianity has tended to look to the distant East, the monastic theology of Egypt being a particularly favoured focus. We followed a different path of investigation, deciding to look for those clues that were directly under our noses, by which we understood the evidence found in the indigenous religious culture of Britain and Ireland. Of course, Christianity was transplanted to Britain by someone (probably *not* Joseph of Arimathea), but it developed a life of its own and produced a religious literature. Focussing on theology, we examined a substantial sample of religious writings produced in Britain and Ireland down to about 900, with some further post-holing beyond. These include historical writings, canon collections, penitentials, monastic rules, scriptural commentaries and works on scriptural questions, saints lives, letters and a variety of works less easily classified. We also took stock of books on religious topics that were imported into Britain and Ireland – at least as far as this was possible, given the rudimentary state of our knowledge of ‘books known to the Britons and Irish’.

In our survey of religious literature (or works with relevance to religion) we decided to go beyond those writings produced in Britain and Ireland, and to include works written by Britons and Irishmen who spent a portion of their lives on the continent, notably Pelagius, Faustus of Riez and

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Columbanus. The writings of all three came back to the British Isles and enjoyed varying levels of circulation. In the case of Pelagius, we were struck by the fact that not only did his works circulate in Britain, Ireland and also Anglo-Saxon England, there was also scattered evidence for the presence of the Pelagian heresy first in Britain, then in Ireland from the fifth to the seventh centuries. If there was no smoke coming from the gun, the barrel and the chamber were certainly hot. Our search for 'more' thus began with Pelagius, and in fact ends there. The thesis of this book is that Celtic Christianity and its Christological images were formed in the matrix of the controversy surrounding Pelagius and his divergent views on grace and redemption. This in turn created a theological spectrum that differentiated Britain and Ireland from the European continent.

As authors of this hypothesis we are aware of its controversial character. We were less cognisant – until more recently – of the conflicting perceptions surrounding the notion of 'Celtic Christianity' which are current in various parts of the British Isles today. In some regions it is possible to obtain an advanced degree in 'Celtic Christianity', a fact pointing to the respectability of the term and its content. But there is also New Age 'Celtic Christianity', a phenomenon not only flourishing in the British Isles, but known to have reached North America and other parts of the world. This is certainly not respectable in academic circles. Indeed, there is now an academic sub-industry dedicated to abolishing the notion of 'Celtic Christianity' altogether, whether it be found in its popular or academic manifestation. We shall have more to say about this matter in our Introduction; here we shall simply assert that communication sometimes requires the use of terms that may be currently unfashionable, but still maintain the power to convey ideas effectively and are preferable to circumlocutions. 'Celtic Christianity' is one such term, as is 'British Isles' and even 'mankind'. To abandon such inclusive terms entirely leads to communicative dysfunctionism – an endless series of qualifications that makes the completion of sentences all but impossible. This has been brilliantly demonstrated by Professor John Cleese in his *Life of Brian*, which, incidentally, also touches on Christianity.

As already stated, the aim of our book is to show that debate over practical issues was *not* all there was to Celtic Christianity. We recognise that some of the ideas proposed in this book – the Pelagian hypothesis and probably also the notion of a 'common Celtic Church' in the fifth and sixth centuries – may be unpopular in some quarters. We did not write to satisfy current academic opinion, much less to give aid or comfort to groups or individuals hoping to appropriate congenial conclusions to their own interests. New Age fans of Celtic Christianity may well be horrified by our depiction of a hell-oriented Irish Church, and Catholic theologians may be dismayed by our characterisation of Celtic Christianity prior to the *Romani* movement in Ireland. If others are pleased with our conclusions because they can be seen to serve a sectarian or other agenda, their pleasure will bring no pleasure to us. Our purpose has been strictly to re-evaluate an historical situation, and to attempt to effect a shift in the discussion of religious issues in the British Isles during a period which we believe not to have been fully understood. We have attempted to portray Pelagius sympathetically without

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agreeing with his views; the same applies to our construction of the common Celtic Church. We neither cheer nor lament the Romanisation of Ireland, nor shed tears over the passing of a Golden Age. We prefer light on the Celts to Celtic twilight.

When we were nearing the end of our work on this book, we had the privilege of seeing a selection of Gustav Klimt's masterpieces beautifully exhibited in the National Gallery of Canada in Ottawa. In a gold square above the oil-on-canvas rendition of *Nuda Veritas* are painted the words of Schiller:

KANST DU
NICHT ALLEN
GEFALLEN DURCH
DEINE THAT UND DEIN
KUNSTWERK =
MACHT ES
WENIGEN RECHT.
VIELEN GEFALLEN
IST SCHLIMM.

These words doubtless overstate our own attitudes and intentions, and we do not pretend to have created a *Kunstwerk*. Yet Schiller's text does indeed support the representation of *Veritas*. The pursuit of truth, certainly of historical truth, requires that one abandon the aim of pleasing. It also requires that one cease to care about appropriations of one's scholarly findings, as these lie beyond all human control.

If we bring any special advantages to our book – apart from those occasioned by our respective disciplines – it is our status as outsiders. It is easier to 'think outside the box' – to use the current jargon – if one is not inside the box. Perhaps more than any other subject falling generally in the category 'medieval studies', the investigation of the religious culture of the British Isles in the transition from antiquity to the middle ages has become the preserve of scholars working in English, Irish, Scottish and Welsh universities. This, of course, has not always been the case. Up to about 1980 there were highly significant contributions by German, French and Belgian scholars. One thinks of Zimmer, Bischoff, Gougaud, Grosjean and Wilmart, to name but some. North Americans, most notably J.F. Kenney and J.T. McNeill, also made signal contributions. However, full-scale studies of early Insular religion by scholars based outside the British Isles appear to be in decline, particularly during the last two decades or so. It may well be that globalisation has divided as much as united us. Europe and North America, united in trade, seem more inward-looking than before when it comes to engaging with history beyond the very recent past. We hope that the present book will be viewed as a tentative effort at correcting this state of affairs.

It remains to say something about our collaboration, and to thank those who have helped us. Michael W. Herren wrote Chapters I–V and the Appendix; Shirley Ann Brown wrote Chapters VI and VII. The Prologue, Introduction and Epilogue are a joint effort. We as authors collaborated on

Prologue

every aspect of the present book, and there is nothing in these pages that does not represent our jointly considered opinion.

We offer our warm thanks to Charlie Wright, who read this book in an earlier draft, and to Paul Meyvaert and Anthony Harvey who helped us with specific points. Jennifer Reid, a doctoral candidate at the Centre for Medieval Studies, University of Toronto, assisted us with the typing and proof-reading of citations in the original languages. Our greatest debt is to the editors of *Studies in Celtic History*: Dauvit Broun, Máire Ní Mhaonaigh and Huw Pryce. They did far more than is expected of series editors, not only challenging us at many points and calling for both clarification and qualification, but also buttressing our arguments with references to primary evidence that we had neglected and to secondary literature of which we were unaware, tracking down incomplete references, even faxing or mailing pages of publications that had not yet arrived in Toronto. We should also like to express our sincere appreciation to the author of the very thoughtful 'specialist report'. We took *nearly* all of the good advice offered in the report as well as that in the reports of the series editors. That we did not take it all is hardly the fault of their authors, and they must surely be absolved of the responsibility for the flaws remaining in this book.

Finally, a word about our intended audience. Within the constraints of a scholarly series reputed for its severe standards, we have striven to write a book that is accessible to all readers interested in early Celtic Christianity. English translations of passages in Latin, Greek and Irish are always given in the body of the text; long quotations in the original languages have been placed at the end of each chapter, so as not to burden pages with excessively long footnotes. We have concentrated on primary sources and have tried to restrict the secondary literature cited to publications that offer important breakthroughs or significant dissenting opinions, or valuable bibliographies. We have also tried to write clearly and in a reader-friendly style. *Lector, vale!*

Michael W. Herren
Shirley Ann Brown

Toronto, September 2001

INTRODUCTION

This book is about the *nexus* of two subjects: the images of Christ, and Christianity as it was conceived and practised in the Insular Celtic regions in late antiquity and the early middle ages. Our work presents a model of early Celtic Christianity and its development from the early fifth to the end of the ninth century or beginning of the tenth century. The topics include institutional Christianity, theology and religious practice. We argue that the character of Christianity that emerges from our analysis determined the range of Christological images found in literature and art produced in the Celtic areas. We hope to demonstrate that the form of Christianity and of Christological images experienced both continuity and change over the period studied, reflecting continuity and change in the theological and spiritual outlook. The first four chapters are devoted to the problem of characterising 'Celtic Christianity' in the period examined; the last three deal specifically with the images of Christ. Of these, the first deals with images drawn from literary evidence; the last two, with images drawn from the visual arts. This introduction provides an outline of our thesis and defines terms used later in the book. We have reserved detailed argumentation and the presentation of evidence for the ensuing chapters.

Our geographical focus is the Celtic areas of the British Isles: Britain (modern Wales and Cornwall and areas now in northern England) and Ireland with its extensions into Iona. Because of the late nature of the evidence, Brittany receives only intermittent attention, and that chiefly where it provides evidence bearing upon Britain and Ireland. However, for historiographical reasons it is essential to include Anglo-Saxon England in this study. The English writers Aldhelm and Bede, who wrote in the late seventh and early eighth centuries, provide invaluable information for our assessment of British and Irish beliefs and practices in their day. Indeed, as all modern scholars of early Insular history are aware, it would be impossible to write anything very meaningful about the Celtic regions without recourse to these sources, particularly Bede. However, English writers were not simply detached observers of the Celtic scene; they were also deeply influenced by it. Irish missionaries and teachers converted Northumbria, in which Bede lived, and were also influential in Wessex and Kent, where Aldhelm circulated. The Celtic and Anglo-Saxon worlds reveal commonalities in such areas as school curriculum and handwriting as well as shared religious values, including the privileging of the monastic life and an ideal of sanctity based upon asceticism. In this book we use the convenient term 'Insular' to denote the common features of the Celtic and Anglo-Saxon religious cultures. However, while recognising common characteristics in the two groups, we remain cognisant of the obligation to point out significant contrasts.

Any attempt at a serious study of the religious thought of this period must confront the gaps in both the written and material record. In the period *ca* 450 to *ca* 630, which is – for reasons soon to be explained – the privileged period of this book, written evidence is at a premium, and material evidence very thin. Early British and Irish writers tell us a good deal about their thoughts, opinions and feelings, but less about their history, and this usually in the terse format of annals. For any connected account of this period we must turn to Bede's *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, finished in 731. However Bede seems to have known only a few sources written before his own lifetime to which we in the twenty-first century do not have access. Even with regard to the history of his own day, he was limited by his geography and his contacts. He appears to have had very little first-hand knowledge of Britain, and though he says quite a lot about Ireland and the Irish, he only rarely mentions place-names in Ireland, or the names of Irish persons who did not travel to England. He knew a number of Irish sources written in Latin, but does not mention Irish works written in the vernacular. He knew about Columba, because Columba was connected to his own island, but nothing about Patrick or Brigit. Fortunately, we possess British and Irish works written in the fifth, sixth and seventh centuries which can be used to supplement Bede's account, which, to be fair, was concerned primarily with the religious life of his own people. However, the (mainly Latin) British and Irish sources themselves are scant for the period *ca* 400 – *ca* 630, becoming richer only after about the middle of the seventh century, and then almost entirely in Ireland. The record for Britain is especially dark after about 600, picking up again only in the later eighth and ninth centuries and augmented by sources emanating from Brittany. The Irish record is also deficient, but in different places. The fifth century is illuminated almost solely by the writings of St Patrick, the sixth is plagued by problems pertaining to the date of the evidence, while the writings of Columbanus – arguably the first Hiberno-Latin writer known by name – are difficult to evaluate because nearly all of these that survive were written on the continent between *ca* 600 and 615. To make matters worse, the Irish annals are unreliable for the fifth and sixth centuries.¹ A continuous record of datable texts written in Ireland begins only with Cumman in the 630s.

The material record is similarly lacunose. For the period *ca* 400 – *ca* 650 there is no evidence for the production of religious art in either Britain or Ireland. We get written descriptions of religious art in Ireland only from a little past the mid-seventh century. Moreover, scholars cannot agree about the dates of many of the religious art objects that have survived from the Insular region in the period we are considering (the early fifth century to the late ninth century), and there is continuing controversy over where some of them were produced. In this book we have endeavoured to use datings for art works based on majority opinion. However, given the problems of localisation as well as dating, it would be dangerous to use works of art as evidence for influence of one region upon another, or for a sudden change

¹ Smyth, 'The earliest Irish annals'.

in ideology. Rather, the works of art studied here have value largely for showing the continuity of motifs supported in texts of often considerably earlier date. While, ideally, motifs from dated or roughly datable art objects should be juxtaposed with texts of known date, this *desideratum* is unattainable given the gaps in both the material and textual record and the difficulty of dating much of the evidence that has survived. Although we have done our best to privilege evidence (whether textual or art historical) that is at least roughly datable and chronologically not far removed from a period or event under discussion, it has sometimes been necessary to appeal to evidence emanating from later periods. In several cases this evidence challenges the received opinion founded on the interpretation of earlier sources. However, as textual critics have learned, *codex vetustior non (semper) melior*. A radically different historical account from a later period, like a surprising textual variant in a late copy, may be explained either by a writer's access to a source unknown to us or by his or her wilful intervention. It is impossible to decide *prima facie* which is the case. A good textual critic suppresses only that late evidence which *repeats* what is already well established by earlier sources; historians would do well to do the same, if they do not wish to eradicate the chance of new discoveries and new evaluations.

Our book is based on the following model of periodisation for Celtic Christianity: (1) A period of *relative* harmony in theology and practice in Britain and Ireland; this is the period of the 'common Celtic Church' (soon to be defined) that extends from *ca* 450 to *ca* 630. The unity is preserved by a prolonged period of relative isolation from continental Christianity. (2) The dissolution of the common Celtic Church due to contacts between Rome and the south of Ireland. This is the origin of the division of the Irish Church into *Romani* in the south of Ireland, and *Hibernenses* in the north and on Iona; the British Church adheres to the roots put down in the first period and maintains isolation. Missionaries from Iona bring the theology and practices of the *Hibernenses* to Northumbria. This period extends from *ca* 630 to *ca* 750. (3) A synthesis of *Romani* and *Hibernenses* ideals in Ireland under the hegemony of the *Céli Dé* movement and a lessening of contacts with other churches in the British Isles. This period extends from *ca* 750 to *ca* 850. While most textual evidence that we use stops at this point, the mid-ninth century appears to mark the beginning of the Irish monuments known as the 'scripture crosses', which constitute the richest source of religious iconography from any part of the British Isles. We use the evidence of these ninth- and tenth-century crosses on the assumption that, to a considerable extent, they represent continuity of the earlier religious ideology of Ireland, and sometimes, even of the common Celtic Church. To be sure any schema of periodisation entails dangers. Things change at different times in different regions, and there may be pockets of resistance to change in a given region. Moreover – and this must be kept in mind – old ideologies can be found side-by-side with the new.

When we speak of 'Celtic Christianity' we do not mean to imply that Christianity in Celtic regions was influenced, to any noticeable degree, by pre-Christian religious ideology or practice in its official theology or liturgy.

One can, of course, easily find such influences in popular manifestations of religion, but these are outside our scope. The term 'Celtic', then, is used in a neutral sense to refer to geographical regions and language groups without the *impedimenta* of racial characteristics. Dom Gougaud's translated title 'Christianity in Celtic lands' would more aptly describe the phenomenon that we wish to discuss – it is just a little ungainly for repeated use. The changes we describe in Celtic Christianity have nothing to do with a greater or lesser degree of 'Celticity', excepting, perhaps, where we see an increased use of the Irish language for religious purposes in the third period described above. Rather, they concern the changing relations between the Christianity of the Celtic lands and that of the other regions of the Western Church. Moreover, by using the term 'Celtic' as a modifier of 'Christianity' we by no means wish to imply that Christianity was identical in all Celtic regions – even during the period of the common Celtic Church (*ca* 450 – *ca* 630). We recognise that the British and Irish apparently never expressed a collective sense of identity as Celts. However, we point out that outsiders tended to lump the Britons and the Irish together with reference to ecclesiastical matters, particularly in the late sixth and early seventh centuries. We have endeavoured to be cautious with the term 'Celtic' used inclusively, and not apply it to beliefs or practices that were uniquely British or Irish.

We expect that some readers will find the notion of a 'common Church' problematic, especially as there was no central authority exercising control over the entire region, whether in the fifth to early seventh centuries, or at any other time. Indeed, even to speak of a 'British Church' or an 'Irish Church' poses grave difficulties.² Clearly it is wrong to impose the model of the English Church in Theodore's time or the Frankish Church under the Carolingian kings on the Celtic areas of the British Isles. If anything, the ecclesiastical situation of the Celtic areas was characterised by decentralisation. We considered alternatives to the term 'Church'. For example, we might have simply referred to 'Celtic Christianity' (as in our title). But Christianity is a movement, and movements imply some organising mechanism, so one is no further ahead. We might also have used the plural 'Churches', or resorted to a small-c 'church', or 'churches'. However, we required a term that expressed the commonalities of theology and some significant features of common practice which obtained over a restricted period. In the end, we decided on a small-c for 'common', in order to signal that we did not regard the British and Irish Churches of the fifth and sixth centuries as a formal institution under the leadership of a metropolitan Church.

It is incumbent on us to explain how there may have been any kind of unity in a given region without a central authority. In the case of our common Celtic Church this seems to have been achieved in various ways. First, there appears to have been a shared respect for the authority of influential monastic figures. Early seventh-century evidence shows that the Britons Gildas and Uinniau were regarded as regional authorities, and later evidence points to the influence of Illtud and David. A second mechanism

² See (J.B.) Stevenson, *The Liturgy*, xi–xiii.

for preserving unity was the advocacy of a common literary culture. We argue that in the common Celtic Church the scriptures were regarded as the highest authority, superseding every other form of authority such as the teachings of the church fathers. We hypothesise that the common Celtic Church was highly restrictive in the kinds of non-scriptural materials it admitted. There seems to have been a bias against theological writings and against hagiographical literature that allowed for the miraculous. With few exceptions, both the use and the composition of scriptural commentaries appears to have been discouraged in the earliest period. Finally, there seems to have been suspicion, even avoidance, of outsiders – particularly those who might be identified as representatives of Roman beliefs and institutions.

In the final analysis, it may be that some historians' ideas of religious unity are governed by anachronistic and anatomic models. One can point to religious cultures elsewhere that have survived intact without centralising institutions such as a supreme pontiff, metropolitan bishops, inquisitorial boards or a 'secular sword'. One thinks of the federation of north Italian churches opposed to the 'Three Chapters' in the sixth and seventh centuries, or of the churches in southern Gaul allied against predestination theology in the fifth and early sixth centuries. The Celtic regions, largely isolated from continental religious trends for 150 years, developed a regional religious culture that was, in some respects, archaic, but in others, innovative. The innovative character of Celtic Christianity was defined by its internal struggle with Pelagianism; the resolution of this struggle produced the common Celtic Church.

The notion of a 'common Celtic Church' presupposes that Christianity in Britain was very similar to that of Ireland from the early fifth to the early seventh century,³ and simultaneously markedly different from the forms of Christianity in other western areas in the same period, notably Gaul, Italy and North Africa. While 'Celtic Christianity' shared the general Dyophysite Christology of the Western churches, and partook of other features that distinguished Western Christianity from Eastern, it exhibited some theological characteristics which marked it as unique, others which, arguably, received greater emphasis there than elsewhere. We would list as defining theological features the assertion of the natural goodness of human nature, the possibility of a sinless life, the denial of transmitted original sin, categorical denial of predestination, a marked tendency to discount the miraculous, and the reliance on the scriptures as the sole source of religious authority. Salvation could be achieved by all through strict obedience to God's law as revealed by the scriptures. The ability to obey God's law in all respects was fostered by *askesis*.

There were also certain practices which were arguably peculiar to the common Celtic Church: an ambivalence about the eucharist, continuation of sabbath alongside Sunday observance and the existence of a ceremony used as a substitute for infant baptism. We have identified these in addition to the well-known divergent practices in calculating Easter, the form of the tonsure and the consecration of bishops. Not every one of these features can be

³ See, however, Dumville, 'Some British aspects'.

exemplified in written evidence in the period *ca* 450 – *ca* 630. Some of the evidence is found uniquely in texts of Irish origin from the seventh and eighth centuries; we have assumed that this evidence is not indicative of innovation, but rather of continuity from the period of the common Celtic Church. Furthermore, it must be stated frankly that not all of the evidence used is assertive: much of it is found in the form of attacks on what we have called ‘defining positions’. Finally, the term ‘defining’ does not mean the same thing as ‘prevalent’ or ‘predominant’. Certain beliefs and practices may belong to a minority of a given group at a given time, yet they powerfully influence the character of the society in which they are found, and they are notable by their absence or reduced presence in other societies. To invoke a contemporary example: evangelical religion, which is practised by a minority of Americans, plays a disproportionate role in religious and social debate in the United States. However, it is far less influential in neighbouring Canada, and, although not non-existent in the United Kingdom, its influence there would be described as ‘marginal’.

The features listed above as ‘defining’ are, for the most part, central doctrines of Pelagius and his followers. The theological points are clearly identifiable as Pelagian, the features of practice, less so. Admittedly, a reading of the Pelagian corpus reveals mostly absences with reference to the sacraments apart from baptism. Pelagians did not recommend sabbath observance, yet their numerous injunctions to obey all of God’s commands provide a foundation for it. Finally, Pelagian opposition to infant baptism is well known, and there is evidence from early Irish canon collections pointing to an alternative ritual to formal baptism of infants. It may be objected, however, that one central feature of Celtic practice was distinctly un-Pelagian: the institution of penitential books and a general reform of the practice of penance permitting the repetition of the rite. By contrast, the Pelagians insisted that no Christian should sin after baptism, and that restitution after a post-baptismal lapse was extremely difficult. What is frequently claimed to be a Celtic innovation in penitential practice thus appears to run counter to the notion of a Church dominated or even heavily influenced by Pelagian ideology. However, it might be more fruitful to see the penitentials as representing a grudging compromise with Pelagian teaching rather than as a denial of its influence. The penances imposed are long and often harsh, and because of their length clash with the Roman-imposed duty of annual communion; moreover, as we shall see, there are texts in the penitentials that set limits to repeatability. At all events, the common Celtic Church was no more monolithic than any other regional church. Some of the best evidence for opposition to, or disapprobation of Pelagians and their ideas is found in the earliest British authors: Patrick and Gildas.

Our very earliest evidence teaches us that in the year 429 the Pelagians in Britain had their own bishops,⁴ and these were opposed by ‘Catholics’ coming from Gaul. It would seem, then, that there was an organised Pelagian Church in Britain for at least some time in the fifth century.

⁴ Prosper, *Chronicle* s.a. 429 (tr. de Paor, 79).

Evidence for the continuity of the sect in Britain will be discussed in Chapter III. However, it would appear that Pelagians had to share their island with another group: the so-called semi-Pelagians. This group, while partaking of some central theological tenets with Pelagians, allowed a place for the role of grace, including certain types of miracles, and held a different outlook on the sacraments. The semi-Pelagians were closely linked with the monastic movement, particularly the type centred in southern Gaul, which emphasised effort based on an ascetic regimen as the means to salvation. This kind of monasticism appears to have been transplanted into Britain towards the end of the fifth century, and had a major impact on the organisation of Christian life. Texts from the sixth century show that a number of Christian communities included a monastic component. Gildas indicates that there was opposition to the monastic movement in his day, and one wonders if this did not come from the Pelagians, who, although in favour of asceticism, were cool to its organised form, and did not impose celibacy on regular clergy, doubtless for sound scriptural reasons (I Tim. 3:2). Whatever the case, there appear to have been two principal groups which composed the common Celtic Church: Pelagians and semi-Pelagians. The two ‘founding groups’ – for want of a better term – shared a number of central theological tenets: both believed in the efficacy of free will and the necessity of works for salvation; both opposed the notion of predestination. The semi-Pelagians, however, made a place for grace and advocated the eucharist as needful spiritual food and a regime of repeatable penance. In doing this, they represented a form of Christianity that was, in most respects, similar to that which preceded the acrimonious debate between the Pelagians and Augustine. Thus, what characterises Celtic Christianity, and justifies our use of the term ‘defining’, is the persistence of *distinctly* Pelagian – as opposed to semi-Pelagian – tenets not only in the period of the common Celtic Church, but in later periods, at least in some regions. There may have been individuals in the period of the common Celtic Church who did not wish to identify with either Pelagian or semi-Pelagian theologies, but one is very hard pressed to find representatives of Augustinian theology, or even of the quasi-Augustinian type that we find in Caesarius of Arles, much before the middle of the seventh century, and then, primarily in the south of Ireland.

It is this ‘theological spectrum’ – if you will – that separated the British Church from the neighbouring Gaulish Church, and commands the label of a separate ‘Church’ as distinct from a ‘local theology’. While Gaul was famous for raising up or harbouring semi-Pelagian writers – Cassian, Vincent of Lérins, Gennadius and the Briton Faustus of Riez – it boasted no famous Pelagians, though we learn that some Pelagian communities had been suppressed.⁵ But more to the point is that some of the fiercest opponents of the Pelagian and semi-Pelagian movements came from Gaul: Prosper of Aquitaine, Germanus of Auxerre and Caesarius of Arles. Prosper wrote an attack on Cassian and defended Augustine against the attacks of Vincent of Lérins. He also applauded the anti-Pelagian

⁵ Markus, ‘The legacy of Pelagius’, 215.

crusade in Britain, which was led by Germanus of Auxerre. In the next century, Caesarius established Augustinian theology, shorn of its predeterminism, in southern Gaul. These agents of Augustinianism had no equivalents in Britain or Ireland. As we shall argue, Patrick was an exception in being theologically at odds with Pelagianism (though this is subtle), but we cannot be sure that his hostility was not the result of a formation in Gaul.

A final point regarding the theology of the common Celtic Church: as already noted, Pelagians recognised only one authority, and this is the divine law, which can be known from the holy scriptures alone. Pelagians implicitly believed that God's law was clear and did not require interpretation; indeed, Pelagian writers thundered against anyone who dared to interpret the law figuratively. The concept of an institution that possessed teaching authority that is additional to the teaching authority of the scriptures was anathema in Pelagian thinking. The semi-Pelagian writings, which focussed heavily on a monastic audience, accorded some authority to the words of venerable abbots, but this authority related almost exclusively to monastic *conversatio*, and was treated more as respected opinion than as a set of commands which could in any way be construed as running counter to scripture. The notion that a local council, or even the universal Church, might command anything that contradicted or undermined what was explicit in scripture would have been unacceptable to both groups. Moreover, what was *not* commanded in scripture could not be commanded by men, regardless of their good motives. It would seem that both Pelagians and semi-Pelagians had a considerably reduced notion of the role of the Church in society. Its main task, apparently, was to teach the law and help individuals to understand it and to obey it. After all, it is only through the fulfilment of the whole law that one can be saved.

We know only a little about the organisation of the individual church communities in Britain and Ireland. The earliest canon collections and penitentials imply that some communities on both islands comprised laity, regular clergy and monks. Bishops appear to have exercised the same functions in the Celtic churches as they did elsewhere; there can be no question that their authority in spiritual matters was usurped by heads of monasteries, though there are cases of individuals who simultaneously held abbatial and episcopal positions. Issues of disagreement were resolved at councils, which seem to have been mostly of a regional nature. There was considerable diversity in monastic rules in both Britain and Ireland.⁶ Our concern, however, is not primarily church organisation, as this subject has been helpfully addressed in several recent publications.⁷

It is probable, but not certain, that the common Celtic Church was more harmonious in the sixth century than in the fifth. While there is evidence that Pelagians still constituted some kind of identifiable group in the sixth century – its status is extremely difficult to define – the more

⁶ See now Dumville, 'Saint David'.

⁷ Sharpe, 'Some problems'; Etchingham, *Church Organisation*; Charles-Edwards, *Early Christian Ireland*.

moderate semi-Pelagians appear to have gained the upper hand. This is shown by the emergence of organised monasticism and a penitential regime that allowed for repeatability. However, a separate Pelagian strain did not completely disappear. In 640, or just before, a papal letter charged that the Pelagian heresy had been resuscitated in Ireland, and outlined the aspects of the heresy at issue. We do not know what events or writings may have instigated the charge, although it is not improbable that it was connected to the controversy surrounding the introduction of martyrs' relics into Ireland and the practice of miraculous healings. Hiberno-Latin works of the seventh and early eighth centuries, and Irish-language works from a somewhat later period offer abundant evidence for a continuing debate over the central hypotheses of Pelagianism and for the continuity of practices that can be explained by reference to Pelagian theology. The upshot of this is that the 'core theology' of the common Celtic Church in the sixth century and in some Celtic regions long afterwards was a mixture of semi-Pelagian and Pelagian elements, and, whereas one might hazard that the milder semi-Pelagian element had become dominant, theological features that are distinctly Pelagian persisted, and continued to be 'defining'. This does not imply that there was an organised Pelagian faction (much less a Pelagian Church) in seventh- and eighth-century Ireland. But it does mean that there continued to be individuals who asked hard questions of the 'main-streamers', and that these questions, or counter-positions, reflected the teachings of Pelagius and his followers.

Although Roman or 'Catholic' practices and some beliefs (for example, the use of relics, belief in miracles) gained a foothold in southern Ireland in the seventh century, the core theology dealing with the process of salvation was never seriously challenged. Effort consistently prevailed over grace, and salvation remained a possibility for everyone up to the end of life. Miracles themselves, rejected by strict Pelagians, eventually found a place in the hagiographical literature, where they were often depicted as a reward for a meritorious life rather than as arbitrary acts of divine intervention in human affairs.

So much for our synopsis and definition of the common Celtic Church. Yet before proceeding, some remarks on the history of scholarship are in order. The historiography of the twentieth century has been characterised by a consistently negative reaction to the 'Pelagian thesis' of Celtic Christianity. Despite the promising title, Heinrich Zimmer devoted only a few pages of his *Pelagius in Ireland* to the central question of possible Pelagian influence on Irish theology,⁸ concentrating instead on a textual study of Pelagius's *Commentary on Paul*. In fact, Zimmer never argued that the Irish – or British Church – subscribed to the tenets of Pelagianism at any time after Germanus's mission to Britain; on the contrary, he thought the Celtic Church (his term) orthodox in all the essentials.⁹ Subsequent scholarship

⁸ Zimmer, *Pelagius in Ireland*, 21–5.

⁹ Zimmer, *The Celtic Church*, 19–24, 129–30.

followed Zimmer in focussing on the *fortuna* of this commentary, and concluded that it could not be invoked to prove the continued presence of a Pelagian party or movement.¹⁰ However, it is simply not true, as recently stated, that ‘In most discussions of Insular theology there has been a detailed discussion of Pelagius.’¹¹ With the sole exception of Leslie Hardinge’s *The Celtic Church in Britain*, and now Charles-Edwards’ *Early Christian Ireland*,¹² no scholarly book on the early Celtic Church written after Zimmer’s day has gone beyond a brief mention of Pelagius, and that usually with the intent of dismissing his influence.¹³ Several articles have raised the question of Pelagian influence on doctrine, with negative results.¹⁴ It would appear that modern scholars have been content to examine only the very few explicit references to Pelagianism as a heresy or movement in Britain or Ireland, or to trace explicit quotations from Pelagius’s writings in British and Irish works.¹⁵ These limited procedures are clearly inadequate. It is only by comparing what is known of Pelagian doctrine with the doctrines enunciated in the surviving monuments of Celtic Christian literature – a time-tested procedure in the study of other periods of the history of theology – that one can attain to any valid conclusions. The procedure requires scholars to familiarise themselves thoroughly with the corpus of a specific theological literature, learning not only its doctrines, but also favoured expressions and privileged biblical passages, then to examine a large sample of *comparanda* with these facts in mind. This is the procedure followed here, and it has yielded a much more positive conclusion than has been obtained heretofore.

The length to which scholars have gone to deny the influence of Pelagianism in Celtic theology is sometimes surprising. In articles written nearly twenty years apart, Charles Donahue advanced the thesis that the *Beowulf* poet – on the assumption that he was a Christian – was influenced by a theological outlook emanating ultimately from Ireland, entailing the principle of *bonum naturale*, that is, the natural goodness of human nature and the possibility of a life lived *naturaliter* without sin.¹⁶ Donahue adduced a number of passages from Hiberno-Latin and Irish vernacular literature to demonstrate the existence of this doctrine in Ireland. However, although *bonum naturale* and the possibility of a sinless life are central dogmas of Pelagianism, Donahue rejected the hypothesis that Pelagianism explained their presence in Irish literature, and sought refuge in the theory of Eastern

¹⁰ (J.F.) Kelly, ‘Pelagius’, 115–17.

¹¹ O’Loughlin, *Celtic Theology*, 16.

¹² Hardinge, *The Celtic Church*, 61–7; Charles-Edwards, *Early Christian Ireland*, 202–14.

¹³ See, however, Bradley, *Celtic Christianity*, 199, for references to popular literature on Pelagius.

¹⁴ (J.F.) Kelly, ‘Pelagius’; Ó Cróinín, ‘New heresy for old’. Dumville (‘Late seventh- or eighth-century evidence’, 52) allows for a greater role for the Brittonic Churches in disseminating Pelagius’s work than previously supposed, but says little about Pelagian theological influence.

¹⁵ Exceptions are: Ó Néill, ‘*Romani* influences’; Nerney, ‘A study’.

¹⁶ Donahue, ‘*Beowulf*’; *idem*, ‘A reconsideration’.

influence, even appealing to Greek theology.¹⁷ J.F. Kelly also reviewed Irish references to *bonum naturale*, but did not regard these as ‘classical Pelagianism’.¹⁸ As we shall see, however, when this concept is found, it is usually in the context of anecdotes about gentiles or the pre-Mosaic patriarchs who lived sinless lives under the *lex naturae*. The idea of the possibility of a life lived entirely without sin was so controversial that Pelagius himself hedged his answer when challenged about it. ‘The possibility of not sinning’ is part and parcel of Pelagian rejection of original sin and the need for any form of grace beyond baptism and instruction, and thus belongs to the central teachings of Pelagius and his followers. Pelagius’s positions on these subjects cannot be seen as a simple extension of pre-Augustinian views, as is sometimes maintained.¹⁹ On the contrary, precisely because the Pelagians were pushed by Augustine to define their views in contradistinction to his own, Pelagian positions on nature, the effects of Adam’s sin, grace and free will are more radical than the Eastern (Greek) views to which they are often compared.²⁰ Whereas it is easy to find attestations of the view that a *lex naturae* had been granted to mankind, statements that anyone, gentile or patriarch, had kept it perfectly are extremely hard to find, particularly after the Pelagius–Augustine debate, in which Augustine triumphed unequivocally. Yet, as will be seen, the examples of this assertion in Irish texts are considerable.²¹

One can only speculate as to the reasons for the general scholarly aversion to the Pelagian thesis, especially as it is the right doctrine, in the right place and at the right time. One explanation may be that specialists in early Insular studies have enough to do – and too many languages to learn – to trouble themselves with the complicated history of earlier Christine doctrine, whose study often requires a knowledge of Greek. On this account, the fifth century (in Britain and Ireland) has remained a kind of ‘no man’s land’ for Insular specialists, falling as it does between the end of the Romano-British period and the beginning of what is termed the early middle ages. There is thus a gap between ‘Insular’ scholarship, which begins in the fifth century at the earliest and works forwards, and patristics, which is regarded largely as the province of ancient history. An exemplary attempt to bridge these fields was made in the recent publication of Archbishop Theodore’s biblical glosses carried out by Bernhard Bischoff and Michael Lapidge.²² But this work was exceptional (in two senses of the word), and there is little evidence of current attempts to overcome the artificial hindrances posed by periodisation and the maintenance of *Fächer*. Given such circumstances, many may deem it best to follow previous authority. If

¹⁷ Donahue, ‘A reconsideration’, 66: ‘There is no evidence that Pelagianism as a doctrine was ever a force in Ireland or that it had any direct influence on the formation of the favorable view of the pre-Christian past that was current there.’ For his view of Greek influence, see ‘A reconsideration’, 71.

¹⁸ (J.F.) Kelly, ‘Augustine’, 142 n. 81.

¹⁹ For example by Markus, ‘Pelagianism’, 198.

²⁰ Wickham, ‘Pelagianism in the East’, 208–9.

²¹ These are given in Chapter III, below, 94–7.

²² Bischoff and Lapidge, *Biblical Commentaries*.

sound scholars have found no evidence for ‘real Pelagianism’, then surely there is no point in looking for it. That is the charitable explanation. A less charitable one – *ne verum sit!* – is that there may still be scholars in the twenty-first century who cry out with Columbanus, *Nullus hereticus, nullus scismaticus* – certainly not in Britain or Ireland!

An unwillingness to examine the possibility of the continuity of Pelagianism in the British Isles after Germanus is, of itself, unfortunate for the history of doctrine, but there are wider disadvantages for our understanding of early British and Irish Christianity. After claiming that Pelagian doctrine is ‘only incidentally a topic touching upon theology in Celtic lands’, belonging rather ‘to the debates of Italy and North Africa in the early fifth century’,²³ Thomas O’Loughlin proceeded to the claim that ‘the theological and pastoral work of the early Irish Church constitutes a “local theology”’.²⁴ In denying the notion of a separate Celtic Church, O’Loughlin states:

Moreover, the ‘Celtic Church’ notion fails to recognize the most obvious facts: the early [Celtic] theological writers whom we shall examine all sought that theological ideal that the truth was ‘what was held always, everywhere, by everyone’, and if they had suspected that they were in any way idiosyncratic, they would have been the first to adapt their ideas to that larger group.²⁵

This statement appears to miss the point that there is a difference between how heretics think of themselves and what, in fact, heretics are. There is no truly objective criterion of what constitutes a heresy, or for that matter, orthodoxy. It is not meant cynically to assert that orthodox thinkers are people who win a particular debate at a particular time, and heretics are those who lose the decision. In other circumstances, had a few votes at a Church council swung the other way, the result would have been radically different. Following the fine Greek principle ‘no one willingly makes a mistake’, all those engaged in serious theology believe that they have orthodoxy on their side. Pelagius, Patrick and Columbanus all believed this, as we shall see from their ‘professions of faith’ given in Chapter II, but, obviously, their opponents did not. Hence, the intention to be orthodox, or the belief that one already is, has little to do with the case. The only thing that matters is the consensus established by the victorious party. In the Insular context, nothing establishes this principle more clearly than the results of the Synod of Whitby. Did the ‘Celtic Party’ acknowledge that it was in the wrong, or immediately attempt to rectify its error? Inevitably, each side appeals to its own authorities, its own logic, and claims victory, or at least righteousness. Pelagius, who, by all accounts came from Britain, and may have been of Irish descent, was never, or only rarely, seen as a heretic by churchmen in Britain or Ireland. (Anglo-Saxon England viewed him differently, as we shall see.) As already noted, his teachings were vigorously

²³ O’Loughlin, *Celtic Theology*, 16.

²⁴ O’Loughlin, *Celtic Theology*, 21.

²⁵ O’Loughlin, *Celtic Theology*, 17.

debated in Britain and Ireland, but the label of 'heresy' was nearly always avoided in internal discussion.²⁶

It follows that the contention that the theology of the Celtic regions was merely 'local' must be vigorously challenged.²⁷ The 'theological spectrum' defined above is markedly different from that of Gaul, and radically distinct from that of North Africa, where devotion to Augustinianism reigned into the sixth century, while the papacy itself, at the end of the fifth century, was reinfected with the Augustinian spirit.²⁸ Whereas it is certainly true that continental Christianity in the fifth and sixth centuries cannot be described as monolithic, it is just as true that Celtic Christianity was distinctively different from all the Christianities of the Western regions in ways already indicated. It is therefore seriously misleading to compare the difference between early Celtic Christianity and the continental varieties to the different approaches to Thomism found at the Sorbonne, Tübingen or Louvain.²⁹ This is to trivialise the continuing history of what had been to date the most serious theological conflict in the Western Church.

Whereas the focus of this book is theological rather than institutional, a discussion of early monasticism in the Celtic regions, and generally in the Insular world, is essential to any understanding of the general spiritual outlook and the more focussed issue of Christology which constitutes the second part of the *nexus* mentioned above. Again, it should be stressed that our concern with the organisation of monasteries and their administrative relation to the wider church is peripheral. Our primary interest is in the prevalence of monasticism and its existence as the religious ideal *par excellence*. While Richard Sharpe has shown that there is no reason to think that the jurisdiction over the Irish Church passed to the monasteries,³⁰ or that abbots usurped the function of bishops, it is indisputable that among Celtic churchmen the monastic life was universally regarded as privileged. It was the life that every Christian should aspire to, and might even be regarded as embodying the 'fulness' of Christianity, with other forms of Christian life being regarded as 'lesser'. As we shall argue, this is an attitude that extends from Patrick and Gildas onwards. So strong was Celtic adherence to the ideal that a form of lay monasticism was offered to those, who on account of marital vows, were unable to achieve a hundred-fold return on their talents!

Although Pelagius himself expressed coolness towards organised monasticism, his principal teaching, emphasising the freedom of the will and the potential of every human being to accomplish his or her salvation, provided the perfect theological foundation for the monastic movement. His contemporary, Cassian of Marseilles, recognised the strength of Pelagius's

²⁶ Markus, 'Pelagianism', 203–4.

²⁷ O'Loughlin, *Celtic Theology*, 21, describes a 'local theology' as 'distinctiveness . . . relative to a community of belief rather than as the symptoms of sectarianism'.

²⁸ Markus, 'The legacy', 222–5.

²⁹ O'Loughlin, *Celtic Theology*, 21.

³⁰ Sharpe, 'Some problems', 242.

doctrine and incorporated much of it into his own ideal of effort-based monastic life. Cassianic monasticism is rooted in *askesis* ('discipline', 'exercise'). Accordingly, an individual, through understanding and effort, by following prescribed exercises, could attain to spiritual perfection. Those who joined the movement and accepted the challenge of the monastic exercises had a far better chance of achieving salvation than those who remained outside. The language of monastic theology was rich in metaphors for effort and struggle: a recruit could be a *miles Christi*, or an *athleta Dei*. He or she was engaged in a daily contest, *agon*, against the devil, the *antiquus hostis*. At the end of life's contest lay the reward of the *corona*, the *laurus*, or the *palma*.

Early Celtic Christianity – and Western Christianity in general – seems to have laid greater stress on the pains of hell than the joys of heaven. Attaining heaven seems to have brought little more than a sigh of relief. The literature of the age is replete with descriptions of the torments of hell, and the dangers to the soul after it leaves the body. Comparatively little is said about heaven. (One might speculate that one reason for this is that human beings have a common understanding of what constitutes pain, but differ markedly in their definition of pleasure.) Ironically, there was agreement between Augustine and Pelagius, who were poles apart on other issues, that salvation was extremely difficult, and most human beings would end up in hell. It followed – logically from the hypothesis of Pelagius, less so from that of Augustine – that a life of mortification (variously defined) provided the only reliable chance of escape from damnation.

For reasons that are beyond the scope of this book, the late fourth-century ideal of private asceticism gave way to organised monasticism in most regions of the West. Monasteries advanced with the growth of Christianity. The monastery stood as the paragon of Christianity in its fulness, a paradigm of sanctity and token of salvation visible to all the faithful. One must not forget that the Christian movement was about changing people's way of life. While there was hope for those striving to be *perfecti*, care had to be provided for others, namely the laity. The war against paganism in barbarian societies arguably had as much to do with the suppression of violence and free love as it did with the defeat of idol-worship and magic. The layman who forwent his idols but kept his weapons and concubines would have been no further along in the quest for salvation.

True conversion requires of all a total commitment to a Christian way of life; it entails the abandonment of pillage and violence and the direction of human sexuality solely to the procreation of children. For the common Celtic Church, and more generally, throughout early Celtic Christianity, membership in the Church required far more than baptism and attendance at the liturgy. It demanded that the 'faithful laity' attain to a monastic condition to the extent that this was possible, namely by practising sexual abstinence for three forty-day periods each year and by submitting to the guidance of a confessor. As is well known, in Ireland such 'lay monks' acquired the name of *manaig*, derived from the Latin *monachi*. The history of early Celtic Christianity, especially in Ireland, is replete with examples of attempts to restrict the concept of the laity to the 'faithful laity', and regard

all others as outside the Church, or as candidates for admission. In the view of numerous ecclesiastical legislators, the Church was all but synonymous with the monastery. If, perhaps, instead of asking the question, 'what was a monastery?', we ask 'who was a monk?', a misunderstanding can be averted.³¹

It is precisely in the context of early Celtic monasticism that the debate between grace and effort takes on importance. A type of grace-based theology that advocates 'love God and do what you will' simply would not do for barbarian societies, where backsliding must have been a constant danger. Thus, even when there is a renewed emphasis on the sacraments and place is found for miracles and relics, the Irish (for whom we have the best evidence) continued to privilege the 'Pelagian' values of good works and obedience to the law. At the spiritual bottom line, God gives his grace to those who deserve it, and miracles are the rewards for a life well lived.

The Christ of early Celtic Christianity was perforce initially the Christ of the Pelagians and semi-Pelagians. In the strictly Pelagian view, he is to be seen primarily as the giver of the New Law and as the ultimate model for human imitation. Thus it is the penitential aspect of Christ – the Christ of the desert and Christ of the cross – that receives greatest attention. Christ's death on the cross was undertaken so that all should die to their sins. Initially, little regard is given to the crucifixion as a redemptive act in the mystical sense. In the Pelagian view, just as all men did not die in Adam, so all men do not rise in Christ. As it is clear that Christ's supreme sacrifice did not and could not accomplish the redemption of all mankind, even though God wills the redemption of all, his mission to the world must have contained a different purpose. This must have been the giving of the New Law and the example of a perfect life. Thus salvation is accomplished by adherence to the law of Christ, by profiting from the instruction he gave, and by imitating his perfect life. We cannot, by virtue of our own wills, imitate Christ's resurrection from the dead, but we can follow in his footsteps into the desert, and onto the cross. Such a characterisation perhaps validates the waggish view of a 'Nestorian Christ saving Pelagian man'.³²

A semi-Pelagian Christology is not so very different in the essentials, but it is a bit softer around the edges. Christ can be seen as a 'refuge' and is referred to as 'Saviour'. He is sometimes accorded the prerogative of drawing some men to their salvation – a notion that strict Pelagians would deem anathema. And, whereas writers such as Cassian were averse to thaumaturgy, there is a recognition that God can operate in miraculous ways to aid the righteous. Grace, then, is awarded in relation to merit. We may have here the theological foundation of what can be termed a 'monastic miracle': this is not a miracle performed *by* monks, but is rather a supernatural reward conferred *upon* those who have earned it through their sanctity. Insular hagiography has relatively numerous examples of such

³¹ This is a refocussing of the discussion in Sharpe, 'Some problems', 260–1.

³² Wickham, 'Pelagianism in the East', 210.

interventions. They often involve the motif of birds or other animals ministering to the needs of the *perfecti*.

As noted above, *Romani* ideas and religious motifs reached southern Ireland by the second quarter of the seventh century, producing a much expanded range of Christological images, drawn from both canonical and apocryphal scriptures. The reading of the gospels was no longer restricted to a selection of Christ's penitential acts and his teachings, but enlarged to include his miracles. The evangelical miracles were supplemented by the apostolic wonders detailed in Acts, and also by thaumaturgical elements from non-canonical literature. It is this extra-evangelical component that creates an image of sanctity strikingly at odds with a Christ based strictly on the canonical gospels. Interestingly, hagiographical literature, which rose fully armed with every kind of thaumaturgical act, was introduced into the Celtic world, and specifically Ireland, shortly after the dissolution of the common Celtic Church. One may have reason to suppose, even if it is not provable in the strict sense, that Pelagian resistance to all forms of grace and the semi-Pelagian preference for 'merited grace' and 'merited miracles' combined to inhibit the development of a genre of writing long popular in Gaul and Italy.³³

The use of non-canonical gospels introduced by the Irish *Romani* produced an image of Christ that was to be embraced by the entire Insular world. This is the 'heroic Christ', the Christ who overcame Satan in physical combat and harrowed hell. Such a Christ would have been unwelcome in the pre-*Romani* world, and probably in other quarters as well long after the dissolution of the common Celtic Church. Pelagian sympathisers, in particular, would have opposed the introduction of the motif on two grounds: (1) non-canonical scriptures should be avoided on the principle that they undermined the clarity of the divine law; (2) there would have been no need for Christ to release those who had already saved themselves! But the power of this heroic image of Christ upon the imagination and the need to demonstrate divine justice largely overcame any theological resistance. The Christ of the harrowing was to become a popular theme in *Insular* poetry. Versions of the tale are to be found in Irish, Latin and Old English.

In one very important aspect, a *Romani* – and specifically Augustinian – image of Christ clearly triumphed over the ideal of the common Celtic Church. This is in the characterisation of Christ as the judge of the world. Pelagius, and certainly the semi-Pelagians too, believed in Christ as the *iudex aequitatis*. For them, Christ at the end of the world would judge everyone fairly according to each one's deserts. Nothing had been pre-decided. For Augustinians, the purpose of the Last Judgement was simply to reveal the good and the evil to the entire cosmos. Christ's Second Coming was not for the sake of judgement, but of pronouncing sentence. The wicked were not only foreknown, but forejudged. But there is more. Christ does not simply dispense a punishment already expected, he comes to avenge himself on those who caused his scourging and crucifixion! Christ arrives 'red-backed'

³³ This point is developed fully in Chapter IV, 118–22.

and carrying his cross.³⁴ This concept of an 'angry Christ', harmonising with the idea of predestination, is clearly alien to both Pelagianism and semi-Pelagianism, and a sharp departure from the theology of the common Celtic Church.

The 'post-dissolution' world of Celtic Christianity offers a mixture of survivals and radical departures. The teaching, preaching, scripturalist and non-mystical Church we have called 'common Celtic' survived in places for some time, but elsewhere gave way to the advocates of grace, sacraments, miracles and relics. While the differences were originally largely regional, it is likely that these disappeared in favour of a synthesis, or perhaps a series of syntheses. As we shall argue, the *Céli Dé* movement effected one such synthesis. However, the theology of the common Celtic Church was never fully eradicated by the *Romani* in their time, or by later continental influences. Christ remained the Perfect Monk, his sacrifice on the cross prevailed over his resurrection (because the latter could not be imitated), a penitential life was recommended for everyone, and effort and merit continued to be preferred to passivity and grace.

The last two chapters bring visual images of Christ into the discussion of early Celtic Christianity. Early medieval art in the Celtic-dominated areas of Britain and Ireland has received a considerable amount of scholarly attention in the past century, spurred on by the study of manuscript collections and archaeological finds exposed by the farmer's plow. Intricately-worked metal objects of obvious Christian intent, illuminated manuscripts of astonishing complexity, and impressive standing high crosses ascribed to the seventh to tenth centuries attest to a lively and sophisticated artistic component within the religious communities. Currently, there are two main approaches to the study of these works of art. One deals with the material and formal aspects of objects, describing and analysing the techniques of fabrication and design, producing catalogues of formal patterns and elements. This leads to the discussion of dating and origins, issues which are fraught with difficulties because of the lack of specific evidence. The other approach focusses attention on the iconographical interpretation of the images, motifs and symbols. Current iconographical studies have become increasingly linked to the study of liturgical usage and development, and to seeking sources in biblical and exegetical texts. Our discussion seeks to place early Christian Celtic and Insular art into the context of Celtic monastic theology, with emphasis on how Christ in his various aspects was represented. Our approach is primarily iconographic, attempting to establish how the viewers of the time would have reacted to the images before them. Style is brought into the equation as an aspect of the total impact of imagery rather than as a separate study devoid of meaning.

There is ample evidence for a thriving Christian art during the Romano-British period as attested by surviving frescos and mosaics, as well as smaller objects, with obvious Christian content. Christ was represented both

³⁴ See the discussion in Chapters V and VII.

symbolically and realistically. We suspect that the apparent hiatus in the creation of sumptuous religious art for Christian use in the fifth to late-seventh centuries and the absence of images of Christ in the common Celtic Church is due to Pelagian-based strictures against luxury combined with their literal interpretation of the scriptural injunctions against imagery. Although religious imagery was introduced into southern England at the very end of the sixth century with the arrival of Augustine and his entourage, it was some time before religious art became established in northern England or in Ireland. The creation and use of religious art and imagery in Celtic Christianity coincided with the growing influence of the *Romani* and the dissolution of the common Celtic Church after the mid-seventh century. The cult of the Cross was introduced into Britain and Ireland and was manifested in both literary and artistic forms. The hundreds of cross-inscribed pillars and slabs, the latter mostly grave-markers, and the remains of equally numerous stone crosses found in both Ireland and Britain attest to the ubiquitous adoption of the primary symbol of Christ and Christianity. Manuscripts containing the sacred texts required for liturgical and monastic use were produced, many of them lavishly decorated with painted decoration and images. Sumptuous liturgical vessels and shrines to hold relics appeared in abundance.

While the original impetus for the creation and use of religious art may have come from Italy, the motifs chosen and the interpretation of both symbol and image were determined by local conditions and tradition. This led to different manifestations in Anglo-Saxon England and in Celtic areas of Britain and Ireland. Irish churchmen returning to their homeland from Rome, probably in the early 630s, brought with them books, relics and perhaps visual memories, but there is no record that they transported images in their currachs. There is no evidence for the importation of continental artisans into Ireland or of the desire to collect artistic prototypes from the Mediterranean. This is in contrast to the undisputed evidence for both phenomena occurring in the Northumbrian monasteries under the influence of Benedict Biscop and Wilfrid. Perhaps for this reason, change occurred more slowly in the Celtic-dominated areas for some time after the incursion of the *Romani*. The severely iconoclastic aspect of the common Celtic Church seems to have created a religious atmosphere which preferred to symbolise Christ rather than to represent him in a realistic fashion. The Western Church had accepted the practice of representing Christ in his bodily form from the end of the third century, but it was not until the Quinisext Council of 692 that this became canonically entrenched. The Christ figures on the Ruthwell cross, generally accepted as dating from the first half of the eighth century, are perhaps the earliest of the 'realistic' images of Christ in the Insular world where the Celtic and Anglo-Saxon traditions met and melded. While the antique artistic tradition had a strong influence on the Anglo-Saxon establishments from the seventh century on,³⁵ it had less impact in the Celtic centres. Only gradually was the representation of Christ and his deeds introduced into the Celtic churches, coming to full

³⁵ Henderson, *Vision and Image*, 56–122.

fruition in the series of so-called 'scripture crosses' of the ninth and tenth centuries.

We discuss symbolic and representational images of Christ separately in order to distinguish the inherent differences in thinking underlying these two conceptions of the relationship between image and idea. We argue that the images of Christ, whether symbolic or representational, can only be fully understood if one acknowledges the complexity of meaning transmitted by visual art. On the primary level it attracts attention as an aesthetic object pleasing to the eye, often employing patterns, motifs and images associated with and easily identified by the society which creates it. Hence the retention of the indigenous Celtic decorative motifs such as the spiral and pelta, along with the Germanic and Pictish animal forms and the Roman interlace, combined to form what we call 'Insular' art. These motifs were used in association with religious art, and undoubtedly secular art which had disappeared, creating objects and monuments which are part of a continuing local tradition rather than incursions from a foreign culture. On a 'deeper' level, images and symbols incorporated into the work of art carry a perceptible meaning which must be deciphered by the viewer. Since each viewer responds to a visual stimulus from the standpoint of personal as well as collective experience, it is important to try to recreate the viewpoint of the particular person or group for whom the images were made, locating both the art and the group in a particular place and time. This is particularly important when studying images, such as that of Christ, which appear throughout the Christian world, but which would convey different meanings to different groups. We have adopted the principle that the only reliable path to uncovering the meaning that the images of Christ would have conveyed to the participant in early Celtic Christianity in Britain and Ireland is to study the texts which would have been known to them. This is the only way to arrive at an insight into the spiritual preoccupations and theological leanings of the local population. The use of texts and liturgies known in the Mediterranean and further afield, but for which there is no evidence for their transmission to the Celtic areas we discuss, may be interesting, but in the end yields little of value – hence our reliance upon Irish and local Latin textual traditions, along with scripture and apocryphal writings as the basis from which to interpret the art. We believe that local tradition would be a greater component in forming the visual expression of Celtic Christianity than would a distant and culturally alien source,³⁶ and that this would be true from the period of the artistic hiatus of the fifth century to the full artistic flowering of the tenth.

We discuss many different ways of representing Christ in symbolic form: the cross, the fish, the sacred monogram, the vine, the tree of life. Since the cross is the most frequently appearing proxy image for Christ, we discuss the nature and development of the cult of the cross which leads to the creation of the stone high crosses of Ireland and Britain. In manuscripts, the cross carpet pages are another manifestation of the same iconography. The singling out of the *Chi Rho* in Matthew is a feature of the luxury gospel

³⁶ See the argument of Stalley, 'European art and the Irish high cross'.

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books created in the Celtic monastic centres and is another manifestation of the iconography of Christ. We interpret the representational images of Christ, where he is shown in his human form, in the context of a monastic community, as providing lessons and ideals for the devout Christian in his or her search for salvation. Hence, we discuss the portrayal of Christ as the Ideal Monk, the crucified Christ as both priest and sacrifice, Christ as Judge and conqueror of hell, Christ as the militant hero at the end of time, and Christ the wonder-worker. All of these correspond to what can be found in available textual sources.

By stressing the monastic and devotional component of the chosen images, even if at the expense of downplaying the liturgical connection, we attempt to place the visual images and symbols of Christ in the context of the life and devotion of the Celtic Christian man and woman, whether clerical, monastic or lay, and the aspiration each would have had for his or her own spiritual future. We do not necessarily see text and image in a direct causal relationship – an image need not have been a deliberate illustration of a specific text. In fact, this is seldom the case. Nor must every level of meaning have been intended by the creating artist or the ‘patron’. Our arguments are built upon the principle that, in our period, texts are ‘absorbed’ into a society and become part of the ‘collective’ way of thinking. An image can recall a number of different associations relayed by texts and culture and can carry multivalent meanings, the comprehension and interpretation of which will be reliant upon the repository of ideas in the viewer’s mind. Two of the examples which we invoke are the Christ/Priest of the Athlone Plaque and the Christ/Moses on fo.114r of the Book of Kells. As mentioned earlier, we posit that even though representations of Christ appear late in our historical period, they embody many ideas which had been established much earlier. But it is essential to establish which texts and doctrines could have been known in Celtic areas in the fifth to tenth centuries in order to create a solid basis for interpretative study of the visual imagery. Hence our study of the visual culture of early Celtic Christianity closely follows the preceding study of the theological and religious culture of which it was both product and component.

I

THE GROWTH AND DEVELOPMENT OF MONASTICISM IN THE BRITISH ISLES

In our Introduction we stated that the Insular world was ‘monasticised’. At the same time, we wish to acknowledge that, at least for the Irish Church, there was no such thing as an over-arching monastic structure under which all religious activity was subsumed. We note that even the meaning of the term ‘monastery’ has been left open to question.¹ In what follows, we examine evidence of a different character, namely that which reveals the promotion of the monastic ideal (expressed in various life-styles) as shown by writers of the three Insular regions. Where possible, we relate this type of evidence to the evidence for the existence of monks and monasteries at various times and in various places. Monastically-oriented texts are, by definition, the writings of an elite about an elite. Those practising the ‘perfect life’ are very few, yet their influence is great, or, more accurately, made to be great by the opinion-makers. These were the proponents of monastic spirituality, whose writings exercised an influence on the clergy concerned with a verbal translation of Christianity to a wider public, as well as on the artists who created objects that could convey specific meanings to the monk, cleric and lay person.

Monasticism began in Egypt and Syria in the fourth century and rapidly spread westward. By the end of the fourth century it was known in Italy and Gaul. What began with individuals seeking salvation in the desert changed into a variety of social forms. Groups could be very small: a chaste widow living in her own home with her virginal daughter, a married couple living in continence by a shrine, a small group of men living in celibacy on an island. As early as Augustine’s day, monastic clergy were attached to episcopal churches, and thus began the long tradition of canons regular.² Separate churches for monks and nuns, otherwise known as monasteries, also found early adherents. This was the case at Lérins, an island off the coast of France near present-day Cannes. In some cases monasteries for monks were contiguous to those for nuns – these were the so-called ‘double monasteries’. A separated community life – coenobitism – found its perfect model in the monastery and rule of Benedict of Nursia, who flourished in Italy around the middle of the sixth century. This model was destined to win over all of western Europe, yet its influence was limited in the Insular world in the period which we are considering.

¹ Sharpe, ‘Some problems’, 260–3.

² Ladner, *The Idea*, 350–65.