

Christian Communities, Transgender People, and Celtic Traditions



Susan Gilchrist

25 September 2021

**PRESENTATION AT THE SIBYLS WEEKEND AT THE PURLEY
CHASE CENTRE**

The Midlands, CV9 2RQ

24-26 SEPTEMBER 2021

***Christian Communities, Transgender People, and Celtic
Traditions.***

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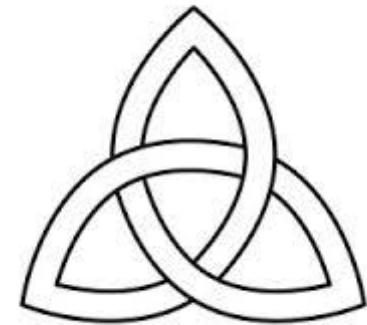


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BACKGROUND

- When I started to put together material for the Sibyls Purley Chase Weekend on the 24th. to the 26th. September this year (2021), I typed the keywords, Celtic, Christianity and transsexuality into my internet browser and found almost nothing.
- Tacitus however wrote: *“Among these last is shown a grove of immemorial sanctity. A priest in female attire has the charge of it. But the deities are described in Roman language as Castor and Pollux. Such, indeed, are the attributes of the divinity, the name being Alcis”*.



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CLOTHING

- Although Celtic women generally wore long “*bog dresses*” and men wore “*trews*”, dress could be interchangeable. In some sources, Druid priests are said to wear voluminous garments.
- However, it is more the known close interaction with other European cultures which leads to the impression that Druid priests cross dressed. In this gender diverse role, they could belong to the shamanic traditions which transcend gender, and through the powers that this gave, bring greater healing to the world.



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GENDER TRANSFORMATIONS

- There are few stories about gender change, and nothing to match the severe threats of gender transformation made by Middle Eastern Goddess cults made against males who could not sexually perform, or who offended the cults.
- One story in the Welsh Mabinogion describes two brothers who are turned first into deer, then into boar, and then into wolves and back into humans. In each case, one of the boys is made a male of the species and the other becomes a female: then they have children together.



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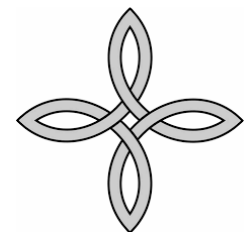


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TRANSSEXUALITY AND HOMOSEXUALITY

- Although we can find little about transsexuality in the Celtic literature, and little more about homosexuality, both of these have one thing in common
- They disrupt the “Good Order” of any society where gender discrimination is practiced. or gender complementarity is socially and legally enforced
- That can be interpreted as engaging in depravities of sex
- In societies where gender equality is practiced, the opposite can occur
- Then the contribution that gender and sexually variant people make can be treated with great respect



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CULTURE AND LAW

- Ancient Ireland was governed by a code described as the Brehon Law
- It is claimed that in the fifth century, St. Patrick distilled these laws down to five volumes, removing and discarding those which did not fit with Christian doctrine. These tomes were known collectively as the *Senchas Mór*.
- The Brehon Law was a system well ahead of its time. It was all about equality and democracy and was based on a complex system of fines instead of corporal punishment. It covered everything from matters of commerce, crime, healthcare, the ownership of property to marital and family law, and equal rights.
- Women were entitled to enter all the same professions as men; they could be Druids, poets, physicians, lawgivers, teachers, warriors, leaders, even Queens. The mythological stories are littered with such references to women of power

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LIFESTYLE

- Christianity in Ireland developed on the basis of equality of the sexes.
- While the Solitary life of a hermit was greatly valued it was not accompanied with the asceticism and withdrawal that one might expect. In both male and female lives of the period, the normal course of events remained as it was in earlier times.
- Monks, clerics, and nuns interacted in close proximity on account of friendship, collaboration, and mutual support and such arrangements neither scandalised nor puzzled the redactors.



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ANAM CARA

- A further tradition that was handed down was that of the. “Anam Cara”
- This is a Gaelic phrase which is often loosely translated as 'Soulmate'. 'Anam' is the Gaelic word for 'soul', while 'Cara' translates from Gaelic to friend. Thus, its literal meaning is 'Soul Friend'.
- Descriptions vary. Generally, it is a term sometimes used to designate someone with whom one has a feeling of deep and natural affinity, friendship, love, intimacy, sexuality, and/or compatibility.
- By connecting with someone and being completely open with them, both souls begin to flow together. Once this deep bond was formed; that person becomes your “Anam Cara”.

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WHAT DID IT MEAN?

- This individual would always accept the 'real' you and could see your inner beauty and light.
- In line with the Roman Christian Church during the first part of the first millennium the only sexual act prohibited was that of "Sodomy..." and that only referred to male same sex intercourse
- Also, that condemnation was because of the abuses of power and sex in the grossly gender and sexually unequal societies in the first century world.
- Same sex loving relationships were welcomed and valued. There was no prohibition of any other sexual act

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EXAMPLES

- Saint Bernard of Clairvaux and Saint Malachy, the Abbot and the archbishop of Armagh are understood to have had a passionate loving relationship. After Malachy died, they exchanged clothes. Malachy was buried in Bernard's habit. Bernard put on Malachy's habit to lead the funeral and wore it until his own death five years later. Bernard was buried beside Malachy, again in Malachy's habit. Malachy (1094-1148) became the first native born Irish saint to be canonized.
- St Brigid's "Anam Cara" was another nun called Darlughdach. Their relationships were so close that they are both reputed to have slept in the same bed.

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CONSEQUENCES

- Gender does not appear to be an issue in the Irish Celtic Church, neither does there appear to be any direct teaching on the subject of homosexuality and Christianity by any Celtic writer or saint
- There is nothing akin to homosexuality as people inside or outside the LGBT+ community describe it today.
- What there is however is a much greater equality between the sexes in the Celtic cultures, and the condemnation of sexual abuse

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SOURCES

- The Celtic Churches only had the Vulgate, Jerome's Latin translation of the bible. Jerome translates the passage, which some modern bibles identify as condemning homosexuality, by using the Latin words "*masculorum concubitoribus*." This implies male on male concubinage or pimping, involving a dominant male penetrating a subservient male.
- That interpretation represented the culture in Jerome's day... and also in the Greco-Roman and the Jewish cultures of Jesus' own time.
- In the Celtic Church and tradition, homosexual behaviour, same-sex attraction, and gender transformations were things that happened, but they do not seem to have been issues of concern.
- And none of these went against the scriptures they read.

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INFLUENCES

- It is sometimes forgotten that from the outset Christianity spread East into a much more gender-equal Zoroastrian culture as well as into the Roman Empire, where gross discrimination took place. That difference had a profound impact on what has occurred.
- From the other side there was the vast missionary work that the Irish monks engaged in. Missionaries from Ireland went to Europe and voyaged for America. Much of Northern Europe was evangelised by the Irish Celtic Church. The Church of the East evangelised much of Asia.
- By the end of the first millennium the Church of the East had become far larger and more widespread than the Roman or Western Church. Both of these groups had developed their theologies in societies where much greater gender fairness, and equality of status between men and women occurred.

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WHAT WAS HAPPENING IN THE ROMAN CATHOLIC CHURCH?

- The Roman Catholic Church developed inside as grossly gender and socially unequal enslaving society
- To be the penetrator in same-sex intercourse was strongly condemned as an act of domination and subjection when the penetrator was a citizen of the dominant society and the penetrated was a member of the subject one
- When both penetrator and penetrated were citizens of the same society the penetrated partner was condemned because he debased citizen's rights
- To be penetrated during same-sex intercourse in any enslaving and grossly socially and gender unequal society, is an “*intrinsically disordered*” act, and the abuse of power gave permission for the abuse of sex.

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HORRORS OF SEX IN THE ROMAN CHURCH

- By the fourth century, Christian redemption for women on earth could only be obtained through motherhood and childbirth or by the denial of all femininity
- A male priesthood was assumed and in place of the prominent role which had been the prerogative of women within the early Church they were only offered a secondary and a subservient role
- Although the cult of Mariology put women on a pedestal and the Virgin Mary was given a very exalted status as an intercessor and mediator, this pedestal confined her to these roles
- Gender equality was at the discretion of the male and on the terms which the male decides. A call to a form of celibacy was adopted which required not just the denial of every sexual act, but also all thoughts of sex

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GENDER CONFLICTS

- The Nestorian conflict was one of the major conflicts in the Roman Church. It centred on whether the Virgin Mary should be called “*The Mother of God*” or the “*Mother of Christ*”. The Roman, or Western Church, insisted on the former. Nestorius and the Church of the East on the latter. We need not go too deeply into theology but there was another important difference.
- In both cases women were required to atone for the fall of Adam in the Garden of Eden. In the Western Church women’s lives had to be lived in penance for the fall: therefore, full atonement could only be achieved after a woman had died. In the Church of the East that atonement had already been made when “*Mary said yes*” to bearing the Christ Child. So, in the Church of the East, unlike in the Western Church, both men and women had full equality of esteem and status during their earthly lives.

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CONDEMNATIONS

- This equality in the Celtic Churches should be contrasted with the vituperations against women in the Roman Church. Gregory of Nyssa wrote in great detail about the life of his sister Macrina. After he referred to her as a woman, he then asked himself the question: *“if indeed she should be styled woman, for I do not know whether it is fitting to designate her by her sex”*
- Tertullian writes: *“Do you not know that you are Eve? The judgment of God upon this sex lives on in this age; therefore, necessarily the guilt should live on also. You are the gateway of the devil; you are the one, who unseals the curse of that tree”*
- With such condemnations any expression of gender or sexually variant behaviour, regardless of purity of motive or intention, is likely to be considered a grossly disordered or disruptive act.

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CONTRASTS

- Those condemnations should be contrasted with the gender equality existed in the Irish Christian Church. The three major Saints Patrick, Brigid and Colmcille were given equal status and given equal recognition of the work they carried out throughout their lives
- Little or no discussion about gender transformation or homosexuality is found in the Irish Celtic Church.
- That is not because this did not exist, because condemnations of sexual improprieties are found in the monastic penitential texts.

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PENANCES

- The penances required for same-sex intercourse and heterosexual intercourse are broadly comparable to each other, and they are milder than the penances applied to bestiality and abuse.
- In the Celtic Church and Celtic traditions, homosexual behaviour, same-sex attraction, and gender transformation were things that happened, but they do not seem to have been issues of concern, and none of these practices went against the scriptures that were available to the Celtic Church.

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CHANGES

- Before the end of the first millennium both the Roman and the Celtic Churches accepted same-sex relationships given in love but condemned all abuses of power and sex.
- That changed when the Church adopted Aquinas' teaching which liberalised sexual expressions within marriage, but condemned all sexual relationships outside marriage as generators of lust and inappropriate acts
- This change brought about a transformation in Christian teaching.

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TRANSFORMATION

- Up to the end of the first millennium a moral duality was encountered, where people who engage in any relationship, including transgender and same-sex relationships which are given in love, and conform to the highest moral standards of society can be highly regarded, while those who seek to break these standards through inappropriate sexual activity and immoral behaviour are very strongly censured for these acts.
- That changed to the traditional present-day teaching which without exception, regards all gender and sexually variant behaviour, regardless of purpose, to be intrinsically disordered, a falling from grace, in pursuit of inappropriate sex and unacceptable acts
- Much has been lost in these changes

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COMMENTARY

- Michael Mitton Writes:
- *"We find, then, in the Celtic church an impressive acceptance of the feminine. It is desperately sad to recognise how this was lost after the Synod of Whitby" Had we been allowed to pursue the natural faith that the Spirit of God first breathed upon this land, which contained a far more just attitude to women than was experienced elsewhere, then our shameful history of repression of women may not have developed...we would also have had a far healthier attitude to sexuality generally, affirming the masculine and feminine within ourselves and within our communities."*
- Celtic Christianity is a grounded Christianity, grounded in all of these things, including the love of nature, the warmth of relationships and the care for the world
- But it has much more than this to offer in the message of the Gospel it brings

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MOVING FORWARD

- When we consider Celtic Christianity, we must consider a Christianity where true gender equality was sought. There was no denigration of gender transformation and sexual acts were condemned when the intent was abuse, not because of the acts.
- In Galatians 3:28, Paul said *“There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus”*.
- How do we engage with society bring this vision to the world?
- IT MAY NOT BE THE CHURCH OR CHRISTIANITY WHICH IS THE MAIN DRIVING FORCE BEHIND THE DISCRIMINATION THAT OCCURS

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SECULAR SCAPEGOATING

- A major feature of gender complementarity or gender divided society comes from the way it separates the male from the female roles.
- Any form of gender and sexually variant behaviour which departs from the usual expectations of that society, for any purpose, challenges this distinction
- People may think of gender or sexually variant behaviour in terms of sexual abuse.
- The transformations I have described have brought the Church to collude with the secular demands of society rather than to challenge them.
- Not only has this collusion reinforced the secular prejudices of such discriminatory societies; it gave, and it still gives religious legitimacy to them.

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CONSEQUENCES

- One only needs to look today at the behaviour of Daesh and Boko Haram to see how extreme this can become.
- The persecution and slaughter of gender and sexually variant people, not just in Christianity but in Islam,
- Judaism and all other religions, states and cultures which have drawn their teachings from it has been enormous. In many African countries extreme penalties against homosexual behaviour are being advocated or applied
- Many churches and other organisations, because of their size and variety of their inputs, have become captive to this scapegoating

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PROPHECY

- No change will be possible for as long as the Christian Churches continue to collude with secular scapegoating by society.
- Instead, the discrimination will increase
- When Paul said In Galatians 3:28, *“There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus”*, He was not describing current society
- That is the vision of the ideal society we are called to express
- The more we encounter the divisions and discrimination in our current societies
- The more we are called to fulfil that prophetic role

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COMMUNITIES

- Many churches and religious organisations have conformed to the demands and institutions of society they cannot stand outside them
- Today we may look to Christian Communities, including the Corrymeela Community, the Iona Community, the Lindisfarne Community, the Northumbria Community, and others to re-envision the messages of Celtic Christianity
- So that they may bring the Gospel message of full inclusion for everyone, including all gender and sexually variant people back to a fractured world
- And to fulfil their missions in that prophetic role

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LESSONS

- By claiming divine authority all religions can be generators of preoccupations as well as truths.
- The Roman Church developed a preoccupation with sexuality. The Church of the East developed a preoccupation with asceticism, The Thomas Christians developed a preoccupation with the caste system in India.
- By returning to the inclusive Gospel of Christian Love, we can truly welcome all people, of all gender identities and sexualities into the fellowship of Christ.