CHAPTER SIX

A COMPARISON BETWEEN AFRICAN AND CELTIC SPIRITUALITIES

6.1 Introduction

Even a cursory examination will show that there are remarkable similarities between Celtic and African spiritualities. Chapters Four and Five were devoted to identification and description of important aspects of both Celtic and African life, thought and spirituality. There are also clearly many important differences between these two forms of spirituality. In the current intellectual and spiritual climate, serious thinkers have begun a world-wide quest for forms of spirituality capable of meeting the needs of contemporary human beings. In this environment, there are many valuable lessons and contributions that Celtic and African spiritualities can make to the development of world spirituality.

Both forms of spirituality are environmentally sensitive, deny the Western dichotomy between material and spiritual realities, and see the whole of life as sacred and lived in the presence of God. This has led popular wisdom in South African to identify the two. One hears statements such as 'Celtic Spirituality? It's just African Spirituality'. The term 'Afro-Celtic Spirituality' has been used, particularly in Southern Africa. Both forms of spirituality are rooted in the historic thought and experience of a people, and they are also perceived by contemporary South Africans to be relevant to their context and concerns, as demonstrated above. For these reasons, we have witnessed a revival of interest in them in recent years.

It is clear that both African and Celtic Spiritualities have relevance and practical value. If this were not so, neither would have adherents, as theology and spirituality has to be rooted in the lives of people in order to have any meaning for them. For this reason, the Western church made a terrible error in trying to force Western theology onto the African church. As a result, much Western theology is judged irrelevant and meaningless by the

average African Christian, and there is a deeply felt need to develop an indigenous African approach to both theology and spirituality.

There are a great number of similarities between Celtic and African spiritualities, so that it was necessary to select key areas for comparison. Four areas have been chosen, because of their importance to Celtic and African spiritualities, and also because each one of these areas represents a challenge to be faced by the contemporary church. These areas are the following: Celtic and African Spirituality and the environment (6.2); Oral Communication and its role in Celtic and African Spiritualties (6.3); Spiritual Powers (6.4); and Relationships between People (6.5), including the important area of Gender Relations (6.5.1). The first two areas clearly play an important role in both Celtic and African Spirituality. The gender egalitarian stance of the Celtic church lends historical support to those who strive for a greater recognition of women's ministries in the church today.

All of these areas are issues which the contemporary church must acknowledge and to which it must formulate a response. The world at the start of the twenty-first century is faced with an urgent threat of environmental disaster. The church of the West must accept its share of blame for this state of affairs, and most certainly cannot ignore the threat of destruction of the natural world, and the creatures inhabiting it, which, of course, includes human beings.

The use of oral and symbolic communication is a dominant feature of both Celtic and African spiritualities, and one which the Western church would do well to study and emulate. Another feature of the contemporary context is that literacy and the printed word no longer occupy the same dominant position in Western communication. People today read less, and look for forms of communication which impact their senses, particularly using visual impact.

Finally, the church today must confront its history of oppression of women, and develop a new, gender inclusive approach to worship and teaching. Throughout its history, the

majority of church members have been women, yet most of the power and authority within church structures has been held by men. Today, the church needs to address this situation as a pastoral concern, and as a justice issue.

6.2 Celtic and African Spirituality and the Environment

Both the ancient Celts and traditional Africans had a deep respect for the material world around them and enjoyed a relationship of intimacy with natural objects and phenomena. In addition, both forms of spirituality saw spiritual and material aspects of life as essentially one, or at least so inter-twined as to be indistinguishable from one another. Sacramental theology, where the visible and material is used to represent the spiritual, was easily assimilated into both Celtic and African cultures. A reverence for sacred objects and sacred places was central to both traditional African and Celtic spirituality. This also explains the popularity of pilgrimage and festivals at special times of the year in both traditions.

The ancient Celts were noteworthy for largely keeping their culture intact, in the face of pressures to conform to the dominant Roman culture. Celts have maintained their independent spirit and this has made them less materialistic than other Western peoples, and less secularised. African peoples, too, have been extremely resistant to both Western materialism and secularism. Many of the customs and views characteristic of these peoples are considered quaint and old fashioned by Westerners, but these cultures have preserved values which the peoples of the West have lost, and are now seeking to recover. The most obvious example is the sensitivity and reverence with which these peoples approach the natural environment in which they live.

6.2.1 Reverence for the World of Nature

Anderson (2000:17) claims that African spirituality is 'pragmatic, practical and this worldly' whereas Western forms of spirituality are 'esoteric and reflective'. While this may be true in general, it is a generalisation, which does not fit every form of spirituality originating in the West. Celtic spirituality certainly does not ignore practical, everyday concerns, or the reality of the world around us. Davies (1999:3) describes Celtic

Christianity as 'a religion that is in close dialogue with nature, rather than withdrawn from it'. The ancient Celtic Christians saw themselves as part of the natural order, and consciously lived in a way which harmonised with the rhythms of the seasons, day and night, winter and summer. This is an important contribution which the Celtic tradition makes to the universal understanding of Christianity and of spirituality. Many contemporary Christians are seeking a way of consciously living in harmony with the world around them.

The same reverence for nature is found in original African spirituality, and both Celtic and African peoples made this concrete by recognising particular places as sacred, e.g. sacred groves, lakes, forests, cross roads and especially wells in Celtic tradition. The Celts also had sacred places which were considered powerful, especially stone circles such as Stonehenge, and ancient sites such as Glastonbury Tor (Baggott 1999:55). Pilgrimage was an important part of Celtic spirituality, and African Christians have readily accepted this idea, especially within the Roman Catholic and Anglican traditions.

African peoples have a great reverence for their natural environment: "Mountains, rivers and certain plants are treated with reverence, firstly, because most African people understand themselves to be related to nature, and secondly, they have divine healing powers through which God is revealed to people" (Seoko 1997:3).

Many of the pre-Christian traditions of both Celtic and African cultures have also persisted, or been incorporated into Christian traditions. Africans may be actively involved in a traditional, missionary-initiated church, and simultaneously offer animal sacrifices and continue practices associated with ancestor veneration. Similarly, if we examine many of the traditions associated with Christmas in Britain, and in former British colonies, we will see the unmistakable stamp of pre-Christian pagan religious rites. For instance, the Christmas wreath on the door, the use of holly and ivy and the Yule log, are all of pagan Celtic origin.

6.2.2 Unity of Humankind with the Natural World

Both Celtic and African Spirituality emphasise the oneness of human beings with their environment, in dramatic contrast with Western dualism which separates physical and spiritual, as well as human beings and the natural world. This tendency has been exacerbated by urbanisation, which leads human beings to further lose touch with the earth and with nature, and by commercialism and the promotion of a consumerist mentality.

In this connection, Lozano (1994:115) argues that the visual and symbolic aspects of the Catholic and Eastern Orthodox traditions make them more amenable to environmental awareness and concern: "Catholic religiosity remains in continuous contact with the earth and its products: the water of baptism, the wine and bread of the eucharist, the oil of anointing, the wax of candles, the roses from the garden" . The church must, of necessity, use physical objects as symbols, and therefore those Christians who value the sacraments highly may well be in tune with creation, and be enabled to see the world as a sacrament of God's presence. However, Christians may not make the connection between sacraments and creation at all. It is therefore a sweeping generalisation to say that Catholics are more environmentally conscious than Protestants. All churches need to develop their teaching to include environmental issues, perhaps linked to their doctrine concerning sacraments.

6.2.3 Material and Spiritual Realities

For both groups, non-material beings and realities, whether angels, saints or ancestral spirits, or nature spirits and gods, were considered present in their midst, and able to influence everyday events. One major difference between the two traditions would be that generally the Celts saw spiritual beings, that is, angels and saints, as benign, whereas in African thought, the same spiritual beings or forces could affect them for good or ill. In particular, the ancestors are believed to have the same characteristics as they did when alive. They do not become morally perfected after death. Thus, if an older relative was vindictive towards his grandchildren during his life, after his death, he may still be

expected to use his new, supernatural powers, to victimise them, unless he is placated by means of frequent sacrifices and other rituals.

For the ancient Celts, some spirit beings were good and others were bad, whereas for traditional African thought, the same spirit could be good or bad, depending on the circumstances and the relationship of that spirit to particular individuals.

6.2.4 The use of physical shrines or memorials

It is interesting that both Celtic and African peoples give ritual significance to heaps of stones, which are placed in a particular place as a memorial of something that happened in the past. In many cases, the purpose of Celtic stone memorials is uncertain or unknown, but many have survived from very ancient times.

Another interesting similarity between African religion and pre-Christian Celtic religion is that neither included the building of temples or other buildings for religious use. The druids, as far as can be known today, erected stone altars in the open air, and early sources attest that the offering of sacrifices to nature gods was an important part of druid worship (Joyce 1997: 42).

6.2.5 Spiritualtiy and Ecofeminism

There is an interesting link between finding a connection with the earth and the rest of creation, and rediscovering the role and value of women in both church and society. This has led to the development of a school of thought which calls itself *ecofeminism*, where "women are perceiving a subtle connection between the subjection of Mother Earth to a pure logic of power and profit and their being made objects of male domination and desire" (Lozano 1994:125). The medieval woman mystic Julian of Norwich has been called the mother of ecofeminism because of the following passage in her writings:

> And in this (God) showed me something small, no bigger than a
> hazelnut, lying in the palm of my hand, as it seemed to me, and it was
> as round as a ball. I looked at it with the eye of my understanding and
> thought: What can this be? I was amazed that it could last, for I thought
> that because of its littleness, it would suddenly have fallen into nothing.
> And I was answered in my understanding: it lasts and always will,

因為 God loves it, and thus everything has being through the love of
God (Quoted in Jantzen 1995:238).

In this passage, Julian shows a remarkable openness to creation, and an affirmation of the earth as good and valuable, as something loved and cared for by God. Julian, and later thinkers who followed her line of thought, would have been equally at home with Celtic celebration of God's creation, and African reverence for the earth.

Besides Ecofeminism, a branch of spirituality has developed which calls itself *Creation Centred* or *environmental spirituality*. Sage (1993:11) claims that this form of spirituality combines the experiential emphasis of the charismatic movement with the social awareness of liberation theology. Both of these factors have been influential in twentieth century developments in theology and spirituality, and have brought a new dimension to the life and worship of the contemporary church.

Whereas in previous centuries Western theology had seen humanity as central to creation with a God-given right to dominate and exploit all other elements of nature, the past fifty years have been marked by a recovery of the sense of our place as part of nature, and of the rights of other creatures. Influential in this process was the theologian and philosopher Teilhard de Chardin, who emphasised evolution as God's method of creation and interaction with the world.

This development has been closely connected to a reintegration of humanity and the earth, and a loss of the dominant individualism of earlier Western thought.

Creation is no longer seen as either a purely material process with no reference to mankind, nor as a process of personal salvation for the individual, irrespective of his cosmic or earthly context (Sage 1993:13).

Ecotheology and ecological spirituality also reflect a movement away from the secularism of the Enlightenment Age and a recognition that "God is no longer to be found only in the mystic realms, but at the very heart of the world" (Sage 1993:13). In other words, theology cannot be separated from daily life and concerns, and God is not to be seen as divorced from creation. Ecological Spirituality also reminds humans that we

are a part of creation, and that we occupy a privileged position in creation, but one that carries a responsibility to the rest of creation.

These trends within modern Christian thought are, in fact, a recovery of ancient values, reflected both in traditional African thought and in Celtic spirituality.

6.3 Oral Communication and its role in Celtic and African Spiritualties

6.3.1 Oral Literature

Both cultures under discussion were traditionally producers of oral rather than written literature. In Celtic lands, the bards held a position of honour, as entertainers, but also as "keepers of tribal wisdom" (Wood 2000:120) and of the history of their people. In both African and Celtic cultures, the introduction of Christianity led to the widespread growth of literacy and of written records and literary works. Most written records of Celtic stories, proverbs and other texts were actually preserved in writing by Christian scribes, and would otherwise have been lost to the world (Wood 2000:7). Irish scribes and historians were honoured as custodians and preservers of their people's history.

> The professional historians and scribes in Ireland were treated with great respect because their preservation of the ancient histories gave their people a place to stand, an Archimedean point from which they could look out at the world and assert their identity, usually by maintaining their own national or ethnic superiority (Condren 1989:xviii).

From the above quotation it is clear that the Celts derived their national identity and pride from their history and their oral literary records. Due to the prominent position given to oral tradition in Celtic society, the Celtic tradition is closely bound to the Gaelic language. Ensuring the survival of this language has become an important nationalistic issue, so that, for example, Welsh children have the option of having their schooling conducted entirely in Welsh, and special schools are set aside for this purpose. Conversely, the speaking of local languages was outlawed by the English authorities at schools in Wales and Scotland in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The occupying forces understood the continuing existence of these languages to be a threat, which would foster nationalistic pride and a desire for independence.

6.3.2 Literacy and the Mission of the Church in Celtic and African Spiritualities

 It may be true that Africans displayed more reluctance to the introduction of writing than Celts, although we do not know the details of how individuals and communities responded to Christianity and Roman culture in the early years of Christian mission among the Celtic peoples. The strength of the monastic movement among the Celtic peoples contributed to the production of illuminated manuscripts, many of which survive today. The Monasteries also became centres of education, for both men and women, from early times.

In Africa, the preaching of the gospel and planting of the church was closely linked to education. This has been generally true across the world, as newly evangelised peoples need to be able to read, in order to read the Bible. In Africa, missionaries tended to concentrate on teaching younger people, especially sons of chiefs and headmen, believing that this was a strategy to ensure the future development of the church. The disadvantage of this approach was that many of the older leaders in African cultures, who were the guardians of sacred African traditions, were alienated from the Christian gospel. Those young people who benefited from a Western education were often placed in a difficult position, where they were torn between loyalty to their elders and traditions, on the one hand, and to their educators and the church, on the other.

Western educators are belatedly realising the need to integrate academic knowledge with real life, and with developing practical skills. Both traditional African and Celtic education methods gave recognition to life experience and do not seek to separate 'pure, abstract knowledge' from daily life. The latter trend is obviously linked to the Western tendency to compartmentalise life into water-tight segments, so that, for example, politics or business has nothing to do with a person's religious beliefs. Increasingly, people are beginning to recognise the fallacy in this position and to seek an integrative world and life view.

It is interesting to note the influence of writing and of Church structures which introduced writing, on ancient Irish law. The ancient Irish developed a system of oral law, known as the *Senchus Mor* or *Brehon Laws.* This law system was only finally abolished by the English authorities in the seventeenth century. The laws were written down by Christian monks in the seventh and eighth centuries, before which they were "committed to memory by generations of *brehons* who were obliged to memorize the traditions of their people" (Condren 1989:62). There were male and female *brehons* and the laws were known for their sensitivity to women's rights.

The introduction of writing necessarily changes the nature of knowledge and of education. Before writing dominates in a culture, oral poetry, proverbs and traditional stories enshrine the traditions of that culture, and education is a far longer process than where knowledge can be obtained from books. Thus, the traditional druid training period was twenty years, to allow for the assimilation of a large quantity of oral literature[1], as well as a lengthy apprenticeship to an older mentor. Similarly, in traditional African cultures, education lasted many years, and was more like a practical apprenticeship than a Western schooling system.

6.3.3 Art and Literature

Both Celtic and African cultures have produced distinctive forms of visual art and of (primarily oral) literature. Celtic art represents a perceived unity between nature, humanity and the supernatural. Thus, abstract spirals and interwoven lines are joined with animal shapes and human faces. Avis (1998:12) describes Celtic art as follows:

> The usually abstract and decorative art of the Celts easily turns literal and figurative, as if these images of animals or gods emerge from the forest gloom or the fire's leaping flame. Often an organic profusion all but overwhelms any straight lines, though the artwork as a whole usually expresses itself with great unity.

Celtic art consists of a variety of shapes and designs. Avis sees these complex artistic forms as reflecting the complex world view of the Celts, where often there is no clear

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[1] The term "oral literature" might seem paradoxical, but it has been chosen in order to recognise that oral cultures do produce and preserve a literature, even if it does not exist in written form.

separation between myth and concrete reality, or between figurative and literal statements.

African art is distinguished by bold lines and images from nature, often carved in wood or stone. African art tends to be bolder and less abstract than Celtic art. The function of African art is not merely decorative, or to give expression to the creative urges of the artist. Objects of African art, and particular carved, wooden masks, are created to fulfil ritual and cultic purposes, "to give a visual impression of the reality of invisible personalities and forces, thereby confirming their truth but at the same time preserving the boundary between the visible and the invisible" (MacGaffey 2000:226).

The art of producing and giving meaning to symbols is a feature of our identity as human beings. This is something which we are beginning to rediscover in the West. A symbol can be something created by human hands, or a natural object, such as a tree or a mountain, or an abstract concept such as a number or a geometric shape (Rees 1992:15). Such an object is given symbolic significance by a group of people, which may be large or small. For these people, the object in question represents a significant concept, or may represent the group itself, their collective identity.

Both Celtic and African cultural patterns are visual and symbol oriented. Neither culture has relied primarily on the written or printed word, but instead they have developed a network of oral and visual communication forms, including proverbs, stories, rituals and the visual arts. It is understood that a visual symbol or a picture may communicate more than a precise verbal formulation and may have more emotive value.

It is important to note that African art, like African religion, is not separate from ordinary life in the minds of its users. The majority of traditional Africans will not categorise visual crafts as 'art'. The objects created are artifacts to be used for a purpose, to be the mouthpiece of a god or spirit, for example, or as a means of communication or entertainment. The category 'art' has been imposed on African culture by Western observers and scholars and implies a separation from daily life. An object is generally

viewed as art when it is displayed in a museum or a shop, not when it is in actual use among its original creators. However, identical objects may be found in everyday use and in a museum display, for example, clay pots or bead creations.

African religion and philosophy was primarily oral, both in its expression, and in the way it was perpetuated from generation to generation: There is no separation of communal life from religion. In traditional African society, there is also no concept of conversion, or an act of adopting a religion or set of religious beliefs. One is born into a religious community, and automatically participates in community life, which includes religious rituals.

> Religion in African socieites has been perpetuated by an almost unconscious process: through the communal religious life of the tribe, the repetition of myths and legends and participation in the cult. For Africans, religion is all-embracing: agriculture, social life, the political structure, economics – everything is imbued with religious significance (Thorpe 1994:107).

Therefore, change in any cultural component within an African society will necessarily have religious implications and will affect religious practices.

In Chapter Five, the importance of African praise poetry was mentioned. It is interesting that the ancient Celts had a similar belief, reflected in the existence of bards, one of the tasks of whom was to praise their employers or hosts with poems and songs. This was to increase the fame of the one praised, and to perpetuate his name for future generations. Bards would sometimes be travellers, who made their living by singing the praises of one important nobleman after another, as they were entertained in their homes. Most wealthy landowners welcomed wandering poets as honoured guests, who would entertain, give wise instruction and give news of far away places.

The Celts used oral tradition especially in religious matters, as sacred truths were believed, in the earliest periods of Celtic history, to be somehow cheapened by being recorded in written form (Davies 1999:14). The Druids, contrary to popular tradition, were not only religious figures, but were also skilled poets, musicians, craftsmen and

legal experts (Sandison 1998:79). The training period for a druid was around twenty years, so that they had time to learn a wealth of oral teaching.

Jordaan and Jordaan (2000:4) state that "Conventions, rules, beliefs and behaviours were transmitted orally from one generation to the next". Therefore, any academic study of African religion, philsophy or psychology must start with myths and oral traditions. It is important that we do study African oral literature, and recognise that it is a literature, of equal value to the written traditions and art forms of the West, reflecting "a rich and variegated intellectual life" (Jordaan and Jordaan 2000:5). Contemporary scholars are becoming more aware of the richness of African oral symbols, styles of communication and literary variety.

The uses of Celtic art are summarised by Richardson as follows: "Celtic art is alive at two levels. On the one hand it is a direct inspiration for artists and anyone interested in design, and on the other it is a revelation in visual terms of the Christian faith" (1995:360). Once the Christian faith had taken hold among the Celts, Christian teachings began to be reflected in visual and oral arts, so that Celtic art and poetry was integrated with the Christian gospel.

The visual arts among Celtic peoples has largely been overshadowed by music and literature, and has only recently been rediscovered by popular culture. The distinctive aspects of Celtic art and architecture include the use of spirals and inter-twined human and animal forms, as well as other images from nature. Visual art, like other art forms, reflected the Celtic joy in creation, and a sense of wonder and mystery.

It is interesting that a similar fascination with African oral literature and African visual arts is noticeable, particularly in contemporary Europe. African oral literature is noteworthy for its variety of genres and subject matter:

> The range of African oral literary forms is seemingly endless. It includes creation myths, myth-legends, half-legendary chronicles and historical narratives either in song or prose; tales that explain natural phenomena, tribal practices and taboos, and cultural or political

institutions; stories and fables that reflect on the nature of man and his strengths and weaknesses; tales of adventure, courage, disaster and love, epics with legendary heroes or fictitious heroes, and tales of confrontation with the supernatural and unseen forces of nature; moralizing stories and stories that define man's place and role in the universe; riddles that amuse and teach and proverbs that stress social values; and a virtually inexhaustible reservoir of animal tales, many of which, at bottom, are morality plays, while others are pure humour (Courlander 1996:3).

African oral literature is a rich resource yet to be fully explored, which the church in Africa must learn from and use in proclamation and teaching. For example, the church should explore African story telling, and learn from African tradition a technique which could be used effectively in a church context.

6.3.4 Education of Traditional Healers and Druids

There are interesting similarities between educating traditional healers in African societies and the methods of training and education practised by the druids. (See Section 5.8 for further information on this subject.) Both cultural education systems emphasised one on one apprenticeship of a young person to an older healer, and as a result, both took place over many years. Knowledge was not merely a collection of information, which a student could learn from the printed page. Learning in both cultural groups was a communal affair, and a function of a deep personal relationship with a mentor.

This aspect of learning is one which is being rediscovered in contemporary education theory, where the learning of practical skills with direct relevance to life tasks is emphasized. Western educators have also come to see how important their relationship with the learners is, and that this will impact the learning process directly. If learners cannot relate to the teacher, they are unlikely to learn the lessons effectively.

6.3.5 The Value of Knowledge in Celtic and African Spiritualities

Knowledge is respected in both Celtic and African cultures and imbued with a spiritual value. Knowledge in both traditions is not divided into neat categories of religious,

scientific, political, aesthetic or mechanical. Knowledge is understood as a whole, and all aspects are considered interrelated.

> In Africa, knowledge itself is considered to be a kind of spiritual force. It is exclusive, mysterious and possibly dangerous. Sometimes such knowledge is of the kind that might be called scientific elsewhere, such as the knowledge of working or healing, but Africans did not distinguish this from other kinds of knowledge until the emergence of African philosophy. Knowledge includes not only the experience of spirits and how to deal with them but social and forensic skills based on proverbs, ritual formulae, traditions and genealogies (MacGaffey 2000:226).

The fragmentation of knowledge into distinct, discrete categories is very much a characteristic of Western secular culture and education. Neither traditional Africans nor traditional Celts had any qualms about bringing religious, philosophical and medical knowledge to bear on a single issue. The rigid separation of natural and supernatural is also a feature of Western thought, which is foreign to both the Celtic and the African world view, where they form two aspects of one inter-related reality.

It is interesting that, in contemporary educational philosophy, the search for a holistic approach to knowledge has re-emerged. This can be seen in the development of co-operation agreements between various disciplines, such as English Literature and Spirituality, for example, or Sociology and Church History. Knowledge is once more being understood as a unity, where different disciplines can inform and reinforce each other, allowing for more thorough study of a subject.

There is a new tolerance among classical anti-religious social scientists. No longer do these disciplines automatically ignore or disparage religious and spiritual aspects of life and society. Instead, attempts are made to understand religious phenomena, institutions, beliefs and practices on their own terms. As a result of the move from modern to post-modern thought paradigms, the majority of studies do not begin with the premise that all religious beliefs are false and without real value for the lives of individuals and social groups. This new openness bodes well for the future of world scholarship and co-operative ventures between scholars of different disciplines, and holding different views.

6.3.6 Literacy, Mission, Colonialism and Africanisation

In the Africa of the colonial era, education came to be valued principally as a means to survival and prosperity in a world controlled and dominated by the Western colonial powers (Kane 1994:141). The introduction of Western education has had many positive results for Africa, and for the development of political, religious and educational leadership in African nations, as well as the ability to record traditional oral literature in a more permanent form (Kane 1994:143). However, as mentioned above, an unfortunate aspect of missionary education policy was the missionary tendency to concentrate on educating the young, which led to an undermining of traditional authority figures, and cultural norms and values. The resulting tension between the two cultural and religious systems continues today.

The great strength of the missionary movement among the Celts in the fifth and sixth centuries was that local cultures and Christianity were successfully combined to a large extent. As such, the contemporary church would do well to study the pattern used by the missionaries to the Celtic peoples and emulate their example. African cultures in the colonial era generally did not receive the same respect from missionaries and colonialists as the Celts did in the early Middle Ages. African customs, beliefs and styles of dress were condemned as 'savage', and had to be replaced by European cultural styles. In many cases, this resulted in African customs continuing in an 'underground' form (Ntetem 1991:104).

For example, African youths still undergo initiation on reaching puberty, despite almost universal condemnation of this practice among the missionaries and their disciples. Customs were carried out in secret, while publicly Africans were seen to adhere to Western religious customs, for example, customs of dress and behaviour. This dualism is particularly widespread among the over-fifties generation, many of whom would have been educated in mission schools and thus imbibed missionary attitudes to their culture.

Younger people are often more open to Africanisation of the church, and to bringing secret rites out into the open. In many cases, church authorities no longer disapprove of

young men undergoing initiation rites, and acknowledge the place of these rites in African society. The only controversial aspect is the physical danger when inadequately qualified people set themselves up as masters of initiation schools, but efforts are being made to control this problem.

6.3.7 The Value given to Work in Celtic and African Spiritualities

In common with all peoples who are subsistence farmers, both Celtic and African spirituality recognised the value of work for ensuring the survival and well-being of the community. For both traditions, work tended to be seen as a communal activity. The Celts were conscious of the presence of angels and saints with them as they carried out their work. Unseen companions were considered as much part of their communities as their families and friends. Therefore, their poets produced prayers to be said, for example, when kindling a fire, when embarking on a journey, or when weaving. Their consciousness of unseen beings around them has an obvious parallel in the African traditional belief in the power and presence of the ancestors in the lives of their descendants, for good or ill.

A major difference between African and Celtic thought is the definition and value given to physical and mental work. The differences are probably due to environment. Peoples who originate from colder areas of the world needed to work extremely hard in order to survive, especially in early times, where there was no technology to help in daily tasks. Therefore, work because a supreme value for such people, even when it was no longer strictly speaking necessary in order to ensure survival. Therefore, the Celts, originating from Europe, had a greater admiration for work for work's sake, rather than work in order to accomplish a necessary task. African thought admires the results of work, but does not have an exalted idea of work without regard for its results. Africans will therefore admire a building, and praise those who worked hard to produce the structure, but they will not praise someone who works hard but does not produce spectacular results.

Differing views on the nature and value of work have been at the root of many inter-cultural misunderstandings and conflicts. People of European descent have often condemned Africans as lazy or incapable, simply because they do not understand the meaning and importance of work in African tradition.

6.4 Spiritual powers

Both Celts and Africans had a deep awareness of the presence and influence of unseen spiritual powers in their daily lives. Much of African spirituality, and the traditional African world view, is concerned with power, with protection from evil powers, or harnessing spiritual powers for good. The major difference here with Celtic Spirituality is that the Christian Celts had a more rigid distinction between good and evil spirits and powers. They often asked the angels and saints to protect them against evil powers. Africans also performed rituals for spiritual protection, but sometimes the powers were seen as morally neutral, and their effects for good or ill depended on who was controlling them, and who enjoyed their favour and protection[2].

6.4.1 Power and Spiritual Forces

Both Celts and traditional Africans were also conscious of the need for protection from evil forces as they carried out their daily tasks. Therefore, Africans took precautions against this by asking the ancestors for protection, often accompanied by offerings, and by preventative magic, to ward off evil intentions. The forces of evil could either make their work unsuccessful or bring harm to the person performing the task. This is still a factor today, where there have been cases of unsuccessful students accusing those who succeed of practicing witchcraft against them, or those less successful in business accusing more successful businessmen of bewitching them.

As noted above, there is a clear difference between the attitude of Africans to the ancestors and that of the ancient Celtic Christians to spiritual beings, in that for the Celts, spirits were either good or bad, whereas for Africans the power of the ancestors is often

ambivalent. Ancestors retain the personality traits and attitudes that they had in life, and may therefore be angry and vindictive, as well as benevolent towards their descendants.

6.4.2 The Role of Mediators from the Spirit World

In Africa, it is common to find a belief system where the High God is remote from human beings, and can only be approached through mediators. These mediators obviously play an enormously important role in African thought and spirituality. Ancestors play a dominant role in Southern Africa, while for many peoples from Central and Northern sub-Saharan Africa, the mediators between the living and the High God are lesser gods or animistic nature spirits. While the role of Celtic saints is in some respects equivalent to that of African ancestors, there are also important differences. The most obvious difference is that the Celtic saints were specifically Christian, and looked up to as Christian examples, as well as being powerful beings, able to help their followers.

The African ancestors may or may not be Christian. They are respected and feared as powerful figures, who may act for or against their descendants, and other members of the community. Therefore, ancestral spirits are not considered good or bad. The very terms 'good' and 'evil' are relative in the more pragmatic African world view. One needs to ask, good for whom? evil for whom? One person's good may be another person's evil.

Speaking specifically of Native North American peoples, Paper describes the relationships between religious practitioners and the spirits as follows:

> In these cultures, the spirits are neither good nor evil. They are neutral with regard to these human values. It is humans, functioning shamanically, that can elicit the cooperation of the spirits that may affect others as good and evil: to kill an enemy is good; to kill a neighbour is evil. The action is the same; the cultural perspective differs (1997:232).

The same idea is found in many African cultures, and this differs sharply from Celtic Spirituality, especially Christian Celtic Spirituality. For traditional Africans, a spirit may

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[2] Appendix 2, which consists of a collection of texts from African and Celtic traditions, includes many Celtic prayers for protection, generally addressed to the angels and saints, particularly Michael and Brigid,

be influenced by a human being, especially a religious functionary or shaman, to act for or against another human being.

The Celts had a deep respect for unseen spiritual companions, but distinguished sharply between the angels and the saints, on the one hand, and the evil spiritual powers which sought to destroy human beings, and were constantly at war with the forces of good. There was no fear that Brigid, Patrick or Michael would turn on believers and use their power to harm them, or demonstrate displeasure. The saints were believed to work alongside human beings, as their guides and protectors. The saints also did not need to be appeased and placated with sacrifices, although prayers and vows are made to them.

In traditional African thought, the power of the ancestors is something to respect and fear. Ancestors must be kept happy by sacrifice and by maintaining one's family responsibilities, including perpetuating traditions, teaching the young the ways of the elders, and the up-keep of graves. The care of the ancestral land is necessarily linked to the favour of the ancestors. Africans feel a close connection to the land of their ancestors, where they lived and where they are buried. This is the major reason why forced removals from ancestral lands caused so much trauma to many African communities during the apartheid era in South Africa. Not only were people deprived of their land, but they were being separated from their ancestors, who were still considered part of the family and the community.

Leaving the ancestral home for economic reasons, as many young people have had to do in recent years, is also a major trauma for them and for the older relatives left behind. Many urban people therefore make an effort to return to their ancestral homes at least once a year as a result. These visits are an opportunity to see living relatives, but also to remain in touch with the ancestors and with the land.

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who were very popular as spiritual guardians.

6.5 Relationships between people

Inter-personal relationships and community values are of great importance to both Celtic and African spirituality. Africans typically define themselves in terms of their tribe, clan, family or age-group, rather than seeing themselves primarily as individuals, and incidentally members of various groups. For the majority of Westerners, individual identity is primary, and children are taught to become separate individuals as early as possible in their development. African children are taught to relate to fellow members of the community, and only secondarily to develop their own personality.

Belonging to a community and to an extended family is an important value to traditional Africans. For this reason, they find it easier to integrate with small, intimate church structures, rather than Western style mega-churches. Many of the African Initiated Churches do not build buildings, but meet outside, or in a school classroom or a private house. While one reason may be lack of financial security, another is surely that these people feel more comfortable in smaller, less formal religious gatherings. Thus, Oosthuizen (2000: 278) records that only 5% of the African Initiated Churches construct church buildings, and 'Africa wants face-to face fellowship to advance the support rendered by the extended family'. In the cities, where extended families are disrupted, often churches take the place of these support relationships. Urban Africans will turn to fellow church members for help in time of need.

The ancient Celts had a strong sense of community, and most of their daily tasks were performed communally. They would also freely share their resources with those in need, in much the same way that we find among African peoples. Their churches also tended to be closely bound with the local community, and often integrated with a monastic community, where the abbot exercised authority over monks and over the surrounding lay people.

6.5.1 Gender Relations in Celtic and African Spirituality
A major difference between Celtic and African thought is found in the area of relationships between the genders. The ancient Celts were noticeably different from

their contemporaries of other nations in their attitude to women, who were treated as equals by the men, and allowed to assume positions of leadership in both church and society. Thus, we find women rulers, judges, druids, bards and prophets, in both pagan and early Christian Celtic society. Celtic women were also expected to play an active part in battles where 'Warrior women traditionally fight alongside their men or hurl curses at the enemy' (Wood 2000:15). While some writers, notably Condren (1989), see the employment of women warriors as a form of exploitation of women, it is noteworthy that Celtic armies, unlike others of the time, included women soldiers.

The majority of African peoples do not accept younger women into places of authority. Elderly women may be honoured as mothers of the community, and are often given recognition as religious leaders. However, in the majority of cases, women who aspire to social or religious leadership in African communities meet opposition, especially from men.

The Celtic church never developed the rigid hierarchical structures of other early churches. This is perhaps why women participated fully in leadership together with men to a greater degree than in other contemporary churches. It is an observable phenomenon that, as institutionalisation of a movement develops, the leadership becomes progressively more male-dominated. In similar fashion, the mission-established churches in African tended to be copies of their counterparts in Europe, where there was limited scope for women's ministries. The only positions of church leadership open to women in most cases were in women's organisations or the teaching of children. This situation is only gradually beginning to change in the present day in Europe, and the churches in Africa have generally been resistant to change in the position of women in church structures.

An interesting development in the Irish church is reflected in an ancient document *The Catalogue of Saints,* where three categories of saints are identified, progressively decreasing in holiness. The definition of 'holiness' in the mind of the writer concerns the

attitude of the church leaders to women, who are seen in an extremely negative light, as dangerous temptresses. The first category of saints lived in the time of Patrick:

> They were all bishops; famous and holy ... and full of the Holy Ghost; three hundred and fifty in number, founders of churches. They had one head, Christ, and one chief, Patrick; they observed one mass, one celebration, one tonsure from ear to ear. They celebrated one Easter, on the fourteenth moon after the vernal equinox, and what was excommunicated by one church, all excommunicated. They rejected not the services and society of women ... because founded on the rock Christ, they feared not the blast of temptation (Condren 1989: 95).

The second group were less holy, and less able to resist temptation, and therefore they separated themselves from women and entered monasteries. It is very interesting that a later commentator on this age singles out the presence of women, considered the source of temptation, as a distinguishing mark of the earlier group. The fact that they were able to resist this terrible temptation makes them obviously more holy than later saints, who found it necessary to separate themselves from women in order to prevent themselves from falling into temptation.

The third category, who are even less holy, had no contact with women at all once they had entered their monasteries. They were obviously, in the writer's eyes, prone to temptation and had to take extreme measures to protect themselves from the power of women. This writing shows that, although women had greater freedom in the Celtic church than in other early churches in Europe, even among Celtic Christians there was an attitude of ambivalence towards women.

The background to gender relations in Celtic and African Spiritualities is the history of the church in Europe. The Celtic churches existed in Europe, but developed separately from the Roman church, and were later integrated into the Catholic Church structures. The churches of Africa were directly influenced by the European church structures and practices, since many of them were transplanted unchanged to Africa. Therefore, a summary of gender relations in the history of the European church follows.

6.5.1.1 Gender Relations in the Early Church

The Biblical writings are in the main gender-sensitive. The biblical writers often use the words *adam* in Hebrew and ʼανθρωπος in Greek, which are then translated "man" into English, whereas "human being" would be a more accurate translation for both words. (Both languages have a different word which refers specifically to an adult male – *ish* in Hebrew and ανηρ in Greek). In addition, the Old Testament writings especially present God has having both masculine and feminine characteristics. Among ancient Christians, this awareness continued in the Syriac churches, but was quickly forgotten in the West.

The mention made of women in the New Testament documents shows that they played a very important role in the life of the early church. For instance, when Saul had the believers arrested, it is expressly stated that the prisoners included both men and women (Acts 9:2). This shows that women also were leaders in the fledgling church They were considered important enough to be arrested in an effort to destroy the movement. McNamara traces the important role played by women prophets in the early church, and the radical differences which we can discern between Jewish and early Christian worship practices.

> In the earliest writing produced by the new religion, Paul assumed that women and men would worship together. His instruction that women must be veiled when praying and prophesying implied that the segregation to which they had formerly been subjected would be replaced by a simple difference of clothing. Prophetesses continued to teach until the third century when the activities of free-lance teachers of both sexes began to fall into disrepute (McNamara 1976:145).

This is a very interesting perspective on a text which is often used to restrict women from public ministry and especially to prevent them from leading worship or engaging in preaching and teaching. Many of Paul's instructions with regard to women can be better understood by contemporary readers if his cultural and religious context is taken into account. The very fact that men and women worshipped together in the early Christian assemblies was counter-cultural for both Jews and Greeks, and some of his instructions, strange to modern readers, are designed to make these counter-cultural communities more acceptable to those outside the church.

It seems that "Women served together with men in the early years until the institutionalisation of the church transformed leadership into the sole prerogative of men" (Grenz & Kjesbo 1995:39). In the earliest period of church history there was equality between the genders in every aspect of church life. Once the church structures became fossilised and the church became a socially and politically respectable institution, this changed dramatically: The structures of the church were then modified so that they conformed to the social and cultural expectations of the Roman establishment, including the household structure, acceptable gender roles, divisions of social class, as well as the Roman legal system and system of government. Rigid hierarchical structures were developed in order to maintain discipline and orthodox doctrine within the church.

The growing influence of Greek thought in the early church had a negative effect on perceptions of women. Many of the Church Fathers express strange assumptions about the nature and behaviour of women, which have their origin in the teachings of Plato, Aristotle and Pythagoras, all of whom assumed that women were by nature inferior and less spiritual than men (Jantzen 1995:31-32). In fact, Aristotle assumes that a woman is merely an ill-formed man. These assumptions underlie all Western thought and philosophy, and remained unchallenged for centuries.

A notable quotation from Tertullian expresses the misogyny, and guilt displaced onto women, which underlies much of the patristic writings:

> You are the devil's gateway: you are the unsealer of that (forbidden) tree: You are the first deserter of the divine law: you are she who persuaded him whom the devil was not valiant to attack. You destroyed so easily God's image, man. On account of your desert – that is, death – even the Son of God had to die (quoted in Jantzen 1995:47).

These words were written to one of Tertullian's women disciples, and their effect on her thinking and behaviour can only be imagined! Tertullian is careful to blame the fall on women, and even goes so far as to say that women are responsible for the death of Christ. He does not stop at this, however, he makes each individual woman carry the blame for their gender's sinfulness.

In contrast to first-century Jewish practice, Jesus expressly included women as His followers (Grenz and Kjesbo 1995:75). He is specifically shown teaching Mary of Bethany, and other women supported Jesus and His followers financially, and yet others travelled with the band. Jesus told parables about women and their activities, whereas many rabbis would not even mention women, or touch them, for fear of being made unclean. He publicly criticised the Jewish divorce laws, which saw adultery as an infringement of a man's property rights, explicitly saying that if a man was unfaithful to his wife, this was adultery, in Mark 10:11. This was a revolutionary statement (Nasimyu-Wasike 1995:74), as it gave a wife the same rights in the marriage as her husband.

6.5.1.2 Gender in the Medieval European Church

The position of women in the middle ages developed from the attitudes found towards the end of the early Christian period. Women were denied a meaningful role in public life, including church life, with a few exceptions, which will be discussed below. Both the general position of social oppression for Medieval women and the notable exceptions to this trend had a profound influence on later developments in the church, and form a necessary background for a discussion of gender in Celtic and African Spiritualities.

A very negative attitude to women prevailed in Medieval European thought. During the Middle Ages, the mystical or symbolic approach to interpreting the Bible came to dominate in the Western Church, along with a dualistic separation between physical and spiritual realms, based on Platonic thought. As women were considered to be more closely linked to the inferior physical world than men, it was argued that educating them as to the "spiritual" meaning of the biblical text would be a waste of time (Jantzen 1995:94).

In spite of these limitations, notable women mystics emerged in Europe during the Middle Ages, women such as Hildegard of Bingen, Hadewijch of Antwerp and Julian of Norwich. Many of these writers pictured God as Mother, in contrast to the dominant ecclesiastical metaphor of the Fatherhood of God. Julian's picture of God as Mother is

noteworthy for its three-fold nature. God is pictured as Mother-Creator, Mother-Redeemer and Mother-Sanctifier (Jantzen 1995:303).

The monastic movement among women Christians had a revolutionary effect on their cultural environment which is not fully appreciated today. In both Graeco-Roman and medieval European society, it was expected that daughters of influential men would marry one of like or superior rank, in order to enhance the family fortune and perpetuate the family name. In a very real sense, this was a young woman's supreme duty. Daughters usually could not fight in wars, or assist their fathers in government or trade, as their brothers would. The only way to repay their parents was to marry well. For a young woman to inform her family that she had dedicated her virginity to God and did not intend to marry was an act of great independence, and flew in the face of social convention. This is often not recognised in today's society, where it is often assumed by those outside religious communities that those who choose the religious life do so in order to 'escape' from the world, or for lack of other options.

In fact, nuns in past centuries had many freedoms which married women did not have, and even aspired to positions and functions in the church otherwise reserved for men:

> Within convents, in the tenth to twelfth centuries, women even had some authority to exercise clerical roles such as hearing confessions from the nuns under them, preaching and sometimes even celebrating mass. But in the later middle ages this was stopped, the powerful abbesses of the earlier period are no longer found (Drury 1994:47).

During the Middle Ages in Europe, women were largely excluded from education, and education came to be the preserve of the clergy in many areas. With the Renaissance and the Reformation, a minority of women began to learn to read. Many noble women from France, Italy, Germany and England desired to read the Bible for themselves, and thus were motivated to learn to read and write. The idea of women studying the scriptures for themselves was viewed with horror in the church hierarchy (McGrath 1994:53). Even in the contemporary church, a minority of church officers regard women ministers and theologians with suspicion and negative prejudice.

6.5.1.3 Women in the Church and Society in the Modern Era

The marginalisation of women in the church did not come to an end with the dawn of the Modern period. The past three hundred years have been dominated by revolutionary movements aimed at the emancipation of the poor. However, women were not included among the oppressed in the minds of most of the leaders of these movements.

With the Englightenment of the eighteenth century, in general, women were not seen in a more positive light. With few exceptions, women remained confined to home and the private sphere of life. Interestingly, religion was forced into the same confines, and therefore, in the minds of many people, religion became largely a matter for women. The only men who took religion seriously were religious professionals, who centred power and authority in themselves, and ensured that important religious positions were male dominated.

Jantzen (1995:2) makes the interesting point that making mystical experience the prerogative of women and a subjective issue for private consideration was part of excluding religion from the public and political domains of life. It was also a way of keeping women in subjection to patriarchal structures and values:

> … if mystical experience could be delimited as private and subjective, this would be a way of ensuring that it did not have to be taken into account by those making social and political decisions: religion could be kept out of politics. If mystical experiences were seen as gender related, especially available to women, and at the same time as private and subjective, then this could be used to reinforce the stereotypes of women as the spiritual nurturers of humanity, while keeping both women and spirituality firmly domesticated (Jantzen 1995:2).

Therefore the church has not sought to take women's experience seriously, or to develop the gifts of women in any meaningful sense. Instead, the leadership of the church has actively suppressed women's movements where the women concerned were seeking participation in the male-dominated church structures. Where women sought to form autonomous organisations where they could exercise ministries away from the main structures, such as the Mother's Union in the Anglican Church, this was encouraged.

These organisations have developed the gifts of women, but they have not always succeeded in challenging women's oppression in the church.

6.5.1.4 Reading the Bible from a Feminist Perspective

In reaction to the history of marginalisation of the gifts and ministries of women, women scholars have developed a new approach to reading the Bible. This approach seeks to penetrate through layers of patriarchal interpretation of the texts, which have shaped the nature of the church and of spirituality, including Celtic and African spiritualities.

Many feminists have come to the conclusion that records of women participants in church history have deliberately been erased from traditions, so that one must read between the lines to discern their presence and their contribution (Schussler-Fiorenza 1995: 29). They argue for a specifically feminist approach to reading the Bible.

Elizabeth Schussler Fiorenza and others desire to develop a "feminist critical hermeneutic", a way of reading the Bible from the perspective of oppressed and marginalised women, in society and in the church. She believes that it is often necessary to read "behind" the texts, and to reconstruct a previous narrative which may have been altered by powerful patriarchal forces, in order to reinforce their position. This approach should be understood as analogous to the liberation theologians consciously adopting the viewpoint of the poor and oppressed. Feminist theology is, in a real sense, part of the liberation theology movement.

It is necessary today to recognise that the suppression of women's voices in the church was often deliberate and was neither inevitable nor unavoidable. The gradual development of a male-dominated church has affected both theology and structures within the church.

> Both the androcentric theological model and the patriarchal sociological models for the reconstruction of early Christian life and community presuppose that the process of the patriarchialisation of the church was historically unavoidable. They claim that early Christian theology and praxis, which acknowledged women as equal Christians and disciples,

was either 'heretical' or 'charismatic', and hence theologically and historically non-viable (Schussler-Fiorenza 1994: 83).

Historically, any movements or individuals who attempted to give space for the development of women in leadership and in theological education, were marginalised or condemned for heresy. A notable example of an early movement which recognised women leaders was the Montanist movement, led by Montanus with two women associates named Priscilla and Maximilla. (Walker 1992:69). This movement, which flourished from the end of the second century CE until the fourth century CE, seems to have been theologically orthodox, with a strong emphasis on apocalypticism, and has many parallels to the Charismatic Movement within the mainline churches in the late twentieth century. The fact that two of the three original leaders were women mitigated against the acceptance of the Montanist movement within the church as a whole. Pelagius, who was condemned as a heretic in the fifth century CE, was also extremely open to the development of the gifts of women, and encouraged women to study theology[3].

6.5.1.5 Gender in the Celtic Churches

The Churches which grew up among the Celtic peoples were remarkably accepting of women in positions of authority and leadership. In this, they were ahead of their time. It is noteworthy that one of the criticisms of the Celtic theologian Pelagius was that he insisted on teaching theology to women. This was offensive to the powerful teachers of the fifth century church, who exhibited misogynistic tendencies, especially Jerome and Augustine.

This openness to women in leadership in the church is one aspect of Celtic Spirituality which makes it attractive to contemporary Christian feminists, and to the present church as a whole, as it seeks to develop structures appropriate for today's challenges. Celtic Spirituality is also more open that traditional Western forms of spirituality to a feminine or gender-neutral portrayal of God, for example, portraying God as a nursing mother.

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[3] See 4.4.

The Celtic churches, in many respects, were more at home with the Eastern tradition than the traditions of the Western Church. The Holy Spirit was long identified as female in Syriac spirituality, just as the Hebrew word for spirit is feminine. This ties in with the Celtic tradition of picturing the Holy Spirit as a Wild Goose, powerful, unpredictable and protective of her young. Feminine images for God in Syrian and Celtic literature included the breasts of God flowing with milk, a symbol of nourishment and delight. All of these themes can be seen in the remarkable nineteenth Ode of Solomon, which is quoted in full below:

> A cup of milk was offered to me,
> and I drank it in the sweetness of the Lord's kindness.
> The Son is the cup,
> and the Father is he who was milked;
> and the Holy Spirit is she who milked him;
> Because his breasts were full,
> and it was undesirable that his milk should be released
> without purpose.
> The Holy Spirit opened her bosom,
> and mixed the milk of the two breasts of the Father.
> Then she gave the mixture to the generation without
> their knowing,
> and those who have received [it] are in the perfection of
> the right hand.
> The womb of the Virgin took [it],
> and she received conception and gave birth.
> So the Virgin became a mother with great mercies.
> And she laboured and bore the Son but without pain,
> because it did not occur without purpose.
> And she did not seek a midwife,
> because he caused her to give life.
> She bore as a strong man with desire,
> and she bore according to the manifestation,
> and possessed with great power.
> And she loved with salvation,
> and guarded with kindness,
> and declared with greatness.
> Hallelujah. (Holt 1999: 28-29).

There are prominent women who functioned as abbesses in the Celtic Church, and who had authority over male and female religious, as well as over the church in the

surrounding districts. Notable examples are Hilda of Whitby and Brigid[4] in Ireland[5]..
The traditions around Brigid are particularly interesting, as they record her presiding at an early Irish eucharist, as well as being consecrated as a bishop. Writers of the early "Lives of Brigid" are embarrassed by this story, and one explains it as follows:

> The bishop being intoxicated with the grace of God there did not recognise what he was reciting from his book, for he consecrated Brigit with the orders of a bishop. 'This virgin alone in Ireland,' said Mel[6], ' will hold the episcopal ordination.' While she was being consecrated a fiery column ascended from her head[7] (Condren 1989:76).

Once again, the association of Brigid with fire or the sun is reflected in this ancient story. The writer is very careful to record that Bishop Mel was not to be held responsible for his action in consecrating a woman bishop. He was 'intoxicated with the grace of God' at the time. However, the writer accepts that Brigid's ordination as bishop was valid and according to God's will, so much so that God overcame the obstacle of ecclesiastical law in order to bring it about.

However, even in the Celtic churches, elements of the struggle for recognition of women's ministry are evident, especially when these churches came under the more rigid hierarchical influences of Rome. Beliefs associated with fertility rites were suppressed, and a negative attitude to women's sexuality was promoted (Condren 1989:80-81). Men who wished to pursue a life of holiness were encouraged to separate themselves from women. "Sexuality was no longer a way to the Divine but a positive obstacle" (Condren 1989:97). Women were identified with the material world, and with sexual and sensual temptation, and therefore considered a danger to those who sought spiritual advancement.

One result of the Christian emphasis on sexual denial was the custom of 'spiritual marriage' , where women lived together with their *consortia* or 'spiritual husbands', who were often clergymen, and assisted them in ministry and liturgical functions. This custom

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[4] The name of the saint is variously spelled Brigid, Bridget, Bridgid and Brigit.

[5] See Appendix 1 for details.

[6] Mel was the bishop responsible for Brigid's ordination.

was practiced widely in Ireland, but was also found in other places. For instance, a bishop in Antioch is said to have had several spiritual wives, and both Irenaeus and Tertullian wrote encouraging the practice. In cases where several women assisted one priest and lived under his roof, this probably had an important economic function, where single women could be provided with food, clothing, shelter and gainful employment. Patrick, however, discouraged 'spiritual marriage', feeling that it placed the men concerned in the way of temptation (Condren 1989:98).

Therefore, while the Celtic churches may be commended for the respect and recognition which they gave to women in leadership and ministry, this acceptance and recognition was not universal or unqualified.

6.5.1.6 Gender in African Spirituality

There is a widespread view that African cultures are automatically opposed to women in leadership roles, and especially feminism in the church. "In essence, this argument assumes that because certain cultures have traditionally regarded women as inferior in status and ability, this situation should persist" (Kretzschmar 1991:112). However, this view fails to take into account the leadership roles played by older women in African societies, such as mothers of kings, for example.

In general, God's feminine nature was not prominent in African traditional belief. However, one does find traditions which point to a feminine side of God's nature. Thus, the Zulu people acknowledged the female fertility deity *Nomkubulwana* (Thorpe 1994: 37) and the Shona use the names *Dziva* and *Mbuya,* and *Zenzere* to refer to God. The basic meaning of *Mbuya* is 'grandmother'. These names are used alongside the male names *Sororezhou,* 'elephant head' or 'grandfather' and *Wokumusoro (*Thorpe 1994:55).

The majority of African women still struggle to be accepted by their peers in positions of leadership[8]. Patriarchal attitudes and structures are largely still intact at grassroots level.

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[7] To some extent, this is changing in South Africa, as a result of the influence of the new South African Constitution (1994), which upholds gender equality as a value. Several influential women have been placed

Even where the structures are changing, old attitudes die hard, and many women in positions of influence and authority encounter opposition and prejudice from men. This is true in the church as much as in secular society.

Women in Africa have been marginalised by cultural traditions and by the Western Churches. Christ needs to be presented in a form acceptable to African thinkers, and a conscious effort needs to be made to present a Christ relevant to the needs of African women. Their situation is described by Nasimiyu-Wasike as follows:

> African women in communion with their sisters in third-world countries are struggling for the bare necessities. Their lives are full of severe hardships. ... In African ethnic groups, there are taboos which restrict women. For example, a woman should not talk when men are having a conversation. Women are not taken seriously, and at times their intelligence is belittled by men. They are customarily looked upon solely as childbearers and servers and often cruelly oppressed when they have failed in childbearing or when their child dies (1995:71).

Women of child bearing age are generally not allowed to exercise authority over men. This means that they encounter severe problems when they seek ordination. Women who are restricted and not given respect by their male peers need to see Christ as involved in their day to day problems, decisions and activities, rather than an abstract theological problem to be contemplated.

If God is thus seen as having a female nature, clearly God can choose to work through women in the church, and gift women for ministry. The implications of this, however, have been increasingly ignored and suppressed in the established church, where if women are ordained, they are overwhelmingly post-menopausal. While a small number of younger women have been ordained in the Anglican Church, most young women seeking ordination face opposition from their communities.

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in the cabinet, and in positions of leadership in the African National Congress government of South Africa, at national, provincial and municipal levels.

Mandew (1991:135) describes the oppression experienced by the majority of Black women within the churches as follows:

> The oppression of women by males is evidenced in the fact that decisions are made by males, lay leadership is in the hands of males, ordination to ministry (with very few exceptions) is restricted to males. Women are relegated to the inferior status of perpetual minors.

Economic issues in contemporary society have both a negative and a positive effect on the position and role of women. It is economic dependence on men within family structures which has kept women in a position of submission to men. If a woman was dependent on her father, and then her husband, for food, shelter and security, then clearly her husband had absolute authority over her and her children. Cultural and religious values which tend to keep women in subjection may therefore be reinforced by economic considerations. It is often true that "Black women now suffer under a triple burden of oppression: because of their class, their race and their gender" (Kretzschmar 1991:113).

With the advent of greater educational opportunities for women, many have become economically independent, allowing for greater freedom in other areas of life. However, it is still true that many women have limited educational opportunities, as, if a family has a limited amount of money available for education of the children, in most cases the boys will get preference over the girls. This perpetuates the problem of uneducated women who are unable to play a meaningful role in society outside the home.

Poor economic conditions may lead a woman to greater economic power, especially where she becomes her husband's breadwinner. However, she is seldom accepted by him as an equal. Bringing in the necessary money and food becomes part of her function, and the husband may take out his feelings of inadequacy on her. There is evidence in contemporary South Africa, for example, of the role played by economics in a number of family murders. If a man is dependent on his partner for economic necessities and she rejects him, he has to deal, not only with his feelings of rejection, but with being deprived of his living. This may lead to abuse and even murder.

The Church today needs to address the issue of the position and role of women within its structures and in the wider society, as a matter of urgency.

6.6 Conclusion

This chapter began with a summary of the similarities and differences between Celtic and African spirituality, with a concentration on the areas of oral and symbolic communication, gender issues and human interaction with the environment. Power and powerlessness is also a major theme in African Spirituality and was therefore discussed in some detail.

Growing out of the extended comparison of Celtic and African spirituality was a recognition of three specific areas where these forms of spirituality have a common application and relevance to the life of the contemporary church. Both Celtic and African spiritualities emphasise ecological responsiblity, and the value of each individual, and of community life, and both have wonderfully used oral literature in their communication. The church today can learn from these ancient forms of spirituality, and use them in its communication, worship and theology.

It is an observable fact that many popular movements begin as largely unstructured, and in such organisations, men and women are free to exercise their gifts, including leadership gifts, as they wish. Later, hierarchies develop, and as a general rule, men assume control. This was true of the early church. In the earliest period, the church was an unstructured popular movement and there is evidence that men and women served together as equals within the church structures.

This is remarkable, also, in that women were relegated to a secondary position in the Hellenistic world, and many of the misogynistic views expressed by the church fathers have their roots in the teachings of the Greek philosophers, especially Pythagoras and Plato, where women are identified with earthiness and the physical, which is considered inferior to the spiritual. The spiritual or rationalistic was considered to be the exclusive

preserve of men (Jantzen 1995:35). Women were often seen as an obstacle to the truly rational man, an impediment to his achieving his true destiny.

It appears that, once the male-dominated hierarchical structures developed, there was a conscious attempt to hide the evidence for women in leadership during the early period. Art works from the earliest period of the church which depict women performing works of ministry such as teaching, baptising, and administering the Lord's Supper have been deliberately altered so that it appears that the figures concerned are males (Grenz & Kjesbo 1995:39).

Privatising and feminising religion was part of a power struggle between the genders, evident in both church and societal structures. This development was closely related to the efforts by the powerful to keep religion separate from political and social issues. And if mystical and religious experience was seen as the prerogative of women, this, too could be used to domesticate women and exclude them from social influence. At the same time, there was a conscious effort to restrict and marginalise women even in the area of religion and spirituality, by barring them from effective leadership roles.

Grenz and Kjesbo state their argument for gender equality in the church as follows:

> Our thesis, however, is that historical, biblical and theological considerations converge not only to allow but indeed to insist that women serve as full partners with men in all dimensions of the church's life and ministry. We believe that the sovereign Spirit calls women, together with men, to positions of leadership in the church and that God's Spirit bestows on women and men the gifts necessary to fulfill such responsibilities. Consequently, to categorically deny women the opportunity to obey the Spirit places us in the position not only of acting unjustly toward women but, more important, of standing in opposition to the work of the sovereign Holy Spirit (Grenz and Kjesbo 1995:16)

This is a very strong statement on women's rights and responsibilities in the area of exercising ministries alongside men, and it is particularly noteworthy, since it comes from the pen of two conservative scholars.

It is important to note that it is not only women who are restricted by artificial barriers and hierarchical structure. Creative initiatives by men in ministry are also stifled and frustrated. Attitudes and structures that restrict women also frustrate many men in ministry. Consequently, egalitarians hope to enlist men and women in the work of bringing about a new face for the contemporary church… they see the growing partnership between women and men in Christian leadership as a means of God's work in reawakening a truly biblical vision and purpose (Grenz and Kjesbo 1995:34).

The problem will not be solved simply by allowing women to occupy roles within male-dominated church structures, mouthing male theological tenets. Instead, a revision of church structures, practices and thought is called for. What is needed is a return to biblical models and biblical values, not an accommodation to the norms and values of our social context.

> The derived nature of clerical authority also means that in the church, hierarchical models must give way to more egalitarian ways of relating to each other. Jesus did not come merely to reverse the location of people in the old social structures. He did not intend to install underlings in dominant positions and reduce the upper classes to subordinate status. Rather, he called into question the very idea of society based on dominant-subordinate relationships. Consequently, in the church any dominance of clergy over laity must give way to the mutual submission of all (Grenz & Kjesbo 1995: 229).

The church, therefore, needs to develop structures which are more in accord with the egalitarian and liberating values of the gospel, and which allow women and men to develop to the fullness of their God-given potential. The church is called to be a radically different kind of society, not merely to imitate the social structures around it.