

CHAPTER 8

CONCLUSION

8.1 Introduction

By way of conclusion to this study, four areas have been identified in which Celtic and African Spiritualities have a particular contribution to make in the life of the contemporary church. They are as follows:

- worship;
- teaching;
- evangelism/apologetics;
- ethics.

The popularity which both Celtic and African Spiritualities have enjoyed in the West in recent years can be linked to a number of developments in popular culture. All of these developments are important because of the challenges which they present for the contemporary church. This study has already identified these developments as the rise of postmodern thought forms, including the promotion of religious pluralism and the development of the New Age Movement with its related challenges.

In addition, the institutional church is perceived by many people, especially young people, to be irrelevant to their needs. The church needs to address these issues as a pastoral issue, and ultimately as a matter of survival.

8.2 Celtic and African Spiritualities and Worship

8.2.1 The Influence of Celtic Spirituality on Worship

Congregations in contemporary South Africa find the celebration of material things in acts of worship associated with Celtic and African spiritualities stimulating and pleasing. Celtic Spirituality especially uses material objects, such as bread, wine, water, candles, sacramentally, to lead the worshipper to find deeper truths through ordinary objects and physical phenomena. This is a prominent feature of Celtic spirituality (See 4.5).

The enthusiasm for Celtic Spirituality as a fashionable way of exploring alternative ways of prayer and worship has waned. However, Celtic forms of worship remain, and continue to be used by individuals and by congregations, and serve to enrich the spiritual lives of participants. It is hoped that this will continue, and that the wisdom of the ancient Celts will be studied and applied to our lives today. Celtic spirituality was ‘discovered’ by many people when it went through its recent phase of popularity. This was a good development in general. However, the danger of seeing Celtic Spirituality as a fashionable set of ideas and practices is that the deeper insights of Celtic Spirituality are ignored. If people simply enjoy the phraseology of Celtic liturgies without understanding its sensitivity to the environment, for example, this is ultimately of limited value.

8.2.2 The Influence of African Spirituality on Worship

African spirituality, along with African theology, is being actively rediscovered in Southern Africa today. It seems that Christians of all cultural and denominational backgrounds are open to this, as they are conscious of living in Africa, and whites, in particular, have a guilt complex about their part in “the evils of colonialism”. As a result, they desire to distance themselves from European influences, and demonstrate that they are true Africans. This has made the search for the development of an African spirituality, including an African approach to prayer and worship, a widespread concern within the churches, and especially within the South African Anglican Church.

Unfortunately, this popular tendency has led many to throw out everything in the Western spiritual tradition as inauthentic, or contrary to the essential truth of the gospel. This is very far from the truth, and, as we have seen, African spirituality has much in common with other forms of spirituality from Europe, and from other parts of the world. A study of African spirituality will help the contemporary church to tap into the riches of African tradition, and also to rediscover deep truths in other ancient spiritual traditions.

Less formalised forms of worship, such as those associated with Celtic and African spiritualities have been used with great success, particularly among young people who are disillusioned with formal structures and fixed liturgical forms. Although current

events, such as wars, conflicts and economic uncertainties, have led people to be more open to ancient thought forms than before, the majority remain ambivalent about old institutional structures, which include the institutional church and traditional forms of worship.

8.2.3 Oral and Visual Symbols and Worship

The greater use of visual symbols, a feature of both Celtic and African spirituality, would be of great value in the church today, particularly among people who have grown up in the television age and therefore are more visually oriented than previous generations¹. There is also a place for greater congregational participation in worship, as contemporary young people are less ready than their elders to sit and listen to a lecture or a sermon, or read a printed text, instead of being directly involved in an event.

The prominence of visual and symbolic communication in Celtic and African spiritualities is closely related to the area of oral tradition, as most literature in both Celtic and African societies was traditionally oral.

8.3 Celtic and African Spiritualities and the Teaching of the Church

Alternative forms of spirituality have the advantage of presenting Christian truths in new or unfamiliar forms, which may be helpful to those who are over-familiar with the traditions and structures of the established European churches. For those from an African background, the introduction of African forms and symbols will serve to affirm their pride in and acceptance of their own cultural identity, and will allow them to make Christian teachings their own.

8.3.1 Oral Tradition and Teaching

Orality and Oral tradition clearly play an important role in both Celtic and African spiritualities. In both traditions, ancient literature has been produced and passed down orally, and only recorded in writing comparatively recently, if at all. African oral literature is found more frequently today than Celtic oral traditions, although the latter

¹ In the North American Anglican and Episcopalian churches, there has been a popular swing back to the use of traditional vestments, incense, candles and other visual symbols, largely as a result of their appeal to the more visually-oriented popular culture.

still exist, especially in remote regions where tradition, and a more traditional way of life, is strong.

8.3.2 Education in Celtic and African Spiritualities

Education is prized by both African and Celtic tradition, and is seen mainly in terms of practical life skills with obvious usefulness to the student. Both Celts and Africans conducted the education of the young in oral form, and a one on one apprenticeship method was widely used in both Africa and Celtic lands. The orally preserved nature of much that was taught necessitated a prolonged period of learning from one's teacher, and learning life skills as well as head knowledge from the teacher.

Celtic thinkers were more inclined to express their ideas in verse and song than in a scientific or theological treatise. They emphasized knowledge through intuition and experience rather than through logical deduction. This was true centuries before the development of the 'postmodern' movement in Western philosophy, but it is interesting that there is such a close parallel between the two movements, making the Celtic approach to life and to spirituality attractive to many people of the twenty-first century.

The contemporary church would also benefit if it internalised and practised Celtic and African approaches to education and training, which saw learning as a life-long process, resembling apprenticeship more than formal, academic courses. Perhaps ministerial training, for example, should take longer than at present, and include programmes aimed at allowing the trainee to gain more hands-on experience.

Celtic and African Spiritualities have a common experience of having been suppressed by a colonial power, and forced to conform to the spiritual and cultural expressions of Christianity favoured by their conquerors. As the spiritual values and practices of African peoples were devalued and driven underground by European powers in the nineteenth century, a similar process was experienced by the Celtic peoples, who were colonized in the sixth century CE by Graeco-Roman political and ecclesiastical forces, as well as by their English overlords in the early Middle Ages.

In the post-colonial era, African Christians have tried to reconstruct a distinctively African form of Christian belief and practice. It is more difficult to do the same for Celtic Spirituality, because the time from colonisation to the present day is too great (Mackey 1995:4-5). However, this is a valuable and legitimate process for those who wish to uncover their spiritual roots. The recovery of spiritual traditions associated with an ancient culture leads to the affirmation of those who live according to that culture today, and may also unearth lost treasures to enrich the lives of those living today.

8.4 Celtic and African Spiritualities and Evangelism/Apologetics

8.4.1 The Need for a New Approach by the Church to Contemporary People

The widespread interest in ancient approaches to spirituality reflects the desire of contemporary people to root themselves in their cultural past, and to discover in ancient thought forms ways in which to approach future challenges. On the one hand, popular culture encourages people to reject the old in favour of ever new developments. On the other hand, there is a recognition that newer is not necessarily better, and there is a yearning to find ideas and ways of living which have stood the test of time.

In the current uncertain climate, the contemporary church is called to present an approach to life and spirituality, which will meet the needs of people today. Celtic and African spiritualities are able to meet those needs because they enable people to develop ideas and practices which are helpful to contemporary Christians.

The volume of literature and of audio-visual material being produced on the subject of spirituality, mostly not from a Christian perspective, indicates a serious challenge to the church. Clearly, there are many people in our environment who long for an encounter with God, or with 'ultimate reality', and clearly the established churches are not meeting this need. The church today must listen to what people are saying, and strive to be more open to their needs. Forms of teaching and worship based on Celtic and African spirituality will help the church in this task.

8.4.2 Postmodernism

A related development is the emergence of postmodernism as a philosophical system, which has led to the dethronement of science and of empiricism as the touch stone of all truth. As a result, religious teaching and spiritual values are given greater respect in the academic community, leading, for example, to the re-emergence of spirituality as a subject for academic study. One aspect of this intellectual curiosity about spirituality is a renewed interest in historical developments in spirituality over the centuries, as well as in spiritualities produced by cultures outside the West.

8.4.3 The role of African Spirituality in Christian Apologetics

African Spirituality has stimulated a considerable amount of interest recently, in Europe and in the United States, especially among African Americans seeking to rediscover the spiritual beliefs and practices of their ancestors. In South Africa, too, there is a new interest in Africanising the worship and teaching of the church. This is especially true of the South African churches after the establishment of a democratic government in 1994.

It is important for the church to harness the power and resources of African Spirituality, so that it does not become side-lined as people find the spiritual resources they seek outside the churches. The leadership of the church needs to demonstrate clearly that spirituality may be both African and Christian.

8.4.4 The Role of Celtic Spirituality in Christian Apologetics

Similarly, Celtic Spirituality is seen by many as an alternative to Christian Spirituality. It is the contention of this thesis that this is not necessarily true. Celtic Spirituality has been greatly influenced by Christianity, and has much to contribute to the life and thought of the present Christian Church. Those who attempt to deny the influence of Christianity and the church in the development of Celtic spirituality are seeing a distorted or truncated picture of Celtic life and spirituality.

Among some conservative Christians, an attitude of *Celtophobia* has developed, in which everything Celtic is seen as pagan or New Age and therefore dangerous. This may well have the effect of driving anyone with an interest in Celtic Spirituality away from the Christian churches. However, we also need to beware of the opposite

tendency, *Celtophilia*, an uncritical absorption of all things Celtic, along with idealisation and romanticisation of the ancient Celts. This tends to happen especially where Celtic Spirituality has become a popular and temporary ‘fad’, and contributes nothing in the long run to the growth and development of the church or of Christian Spirituality.

The contemporary church must seek to steer a path between Celtophobia and Celtophilia, allowing it to harness the resources inherent in Celtic Spirituality while avoiding an uncritical romanticism in its approach.

8.5 Celtic and African Spiritualities and Ethics

Two clearly identifiable areas of ethical teaching covered by both Celtic and African Spiritualities are Environmentalism and Gender Relations.

8.5.1 Celtic and African Spirituality and Environmental Ethics

An obvious example of the way in which the contemporary church can and should integrate its teaching with Celtic and African spiritualities is in developing a more holistic approach to human interaction with the natural environment. Celtic and African spiritualities teach us to treat other creatures and natural phenomena with respect, not worshipping them as gods, but appreciating them and seeking ways to interact with them without unnecessary exploitation.

Both Celtic and African spiritualities have a positive view of creation and of the material world, in which they acknowledge that human beings are part of creation, and should treat the rest of the world with respect. This view has a clear message both for the church of the twenty-first century, and for humanity as a whole, as we grapple with environmental issues on a scale never before faced by the human race.

For example, if African spirituality sensitises those who adhere to it to their place in creation, this will help the church to rediscover ecological sensitivity in other traditions, and to correct past insensitivity in this area.

8.5.2 Celtic and African Spirituality and Gender Relations

Traditional African societies tended to have more defined roles for men and women, whereas in Celtic society roles were largely shared between the genders, as were positions of authority. Thus, both men and women served as soldiers, druids and chieftains. In traditional African societies, women chieftains are found, but are exceptions to the rule. Women in positions of religious leadership are more frequently found, but they rarely exercise authority over adult males. Exceptions to this are found where women are believed to be seized by a spirit power, so that they become the mouth pieces for an ancestor or other spirit, and elderly women, who may exercise a powerful influence on the male leadership of a community.

The dominant Western Christian tradition has been less open to women leaders than either the Celtic or the African tradition. Therefore, Celtic and African spiritualities present the contemporary church with a challenge to appreciate and affirm the gifts of women within its structures and in its teaching and practises. This challenge is one of ethics and of upholding the right of women to make a meaningful contribution to the church.

8.6 Conclusion

The study of spirituality has grown out of a popular rediscovery of its relevance to daily lives of twenty-first century people. The understanding of the concept 'spirituality' is also far broader than it has been in the past, even incorporating the life and world view of non-religious people. The church must seek ways both to capitalise on the widespread interest in spirituality among those with no ties to the institutional churches, and also to adapt its presentation of the gospel message to meet contemporary needs and aspirations.

The search for alternative forms of spirituality and religious experience needs to be addressed in the established churches, and where necessary, churches must be prepared to adapt their worship and teaching style in order to reach out to contemporary people. Celtic and African spirituality provide two possible sources of material for this necessary transformation. Traditional approaches to catechesis could be strengthened and enhanced by the addition of material which would introduce children and new Christians to spirituality, and help them to develop their own,

personal spirituality. This would supplement existing doctrinal material, and assist the catechumen to apply the faith at a practical level in his or her daily life.

African and Celtic Spiritualities reflect insights which the Western Church has largely ignored or forgotten. The rediscovery of these forms of spirituality has led us to focus again on our integration with creation, on the gifts and ministries of women, and on the value of oral and symbolic forms of communication in worship, evangelism and teaching, as well as in spiritual counselling and direction. The reverse could also be argued, that is, that these forms of spirituality have come to occupy so important a place in the popular imagination precisely because they reinforce prominent values in contemporary social life. Whichever development came first, both Celtic and African spiritualities have an important part to play in the life and theology of the contemporary church.