The Egyptian Desert in the Irish Bogs

The Byzantine Character of Early Celtic Monasticism

by
Father Gregory Telepneff

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Chapter 1

Introduction

Celtic Christianity is a subject which currently enjoys a general popularity. Unfortunately, this popularity is largely a dilettantish infatuation with its "mystical" (critics would say "mythical") dimensions, an attraction to the romantic reputation which seems to emanate from all things Celtic. For the Eastern Orthodox, in particular, Celtic Christianity holds a special appeal, but not because it is somehow "exotic"; rather, the Faith of the ancient Irish has an air of familiarity for an Orthodox, a certain quality which he intuitively identifies with his own Faith. This statement will no doubt sound odd to those who might imagine that Eastern Orthodoxy and Celtic Christianity are about as incongruous as the Egyptian desert and the Irish bogs. But as more and more Easterners have found themselves citizens of the Western world, and as more and more Westerners have found themselves converts in the Eastern Church, the rôle of Eastern influence on the inception and development of Christianity in Hibernia, the westernmost reach of the ancient world, has come to receive greater and greater recognition. (Here, an important point must be made: Ireland proper was known in antiquity as either Hibernia or Scottia. When speaking of Celtic Christianity, therefore, we are referring to the ethnic group then inhabiting what is now Ireland and Scotland.[1])

For example, it is widely known that remarkable similarities exist between the monasticism of the Christian Celts and the monasticism of the Orthodox Easterners, similarities which are simply too widespread and extend to too many aspects of ecclesiastical life to be merely coincidental. To account for these similarities,

[1] Wales, although populated by some Celtic peoples, is usually treated as an integral part of Britain and therefore falls outside the scope of our present study (*cf.* John T. McNeill, *The Celtic Churches* [Chicago, IL: 1974], p. 36).

it is only natural for an Eastern Orthodox thinker to refer to the cultural hegemony achieved by the Christianized Roman Empire —the "Byzantine Empire," as Western historiography would have it. Again, this may strike many as an odd, even extravagant, claim, since, firstly, Hibernia never passed under the rule of the Roman Empire, whether pagan or Christian; and, secondly, Rome was succumbing to barbarian domination at the very time the first Celtic converts to Christianity were being made. To the former point, we answer that, like many other pagan peoples, in accepting Christianity (and, of necessity, civilization with it), the Celts came into the expansive cultural sphere of influence of Byzantium, even if they remained outside of its political boundaries; to the latter point, we answer that it is a seriously truncated view of history (one ubiquitous in Western thought since the unobjective scholarship of Edward Gibbon [1737–1794]) which confuses the fall of the *City* of Rome with the the fall of the *Empire* of Rome. When Rome, the city, was finally sacked by the Germanic forces of Odoacer (433–493) in 476, only the Western provinces of Rome, the empire, fell with it; the Roman Empire itself remained alive and well in its Eastern provinces, with power centralized in Rome's sister city, Byzantium—otherwise known as Constantinople (modern-day İstanbul), *i.e.,* the City of Saint Constantine the Great (274–337),[2] rechristened "New Rome" when it became the Imperial Capital of this first Christian Roman Emperor.

We intend, therefore, to demonstrate the Eastern character of early Celtic monasticism, especially that of the sixth century, by exploring its connection with Byzantine Egypt, a region which decisively influenced its inception and development. The earliest Christianization of Hibernia is shrouded in much conjecture; certainly by the fifth century, at the time of the great missionary Apostle to the Celts, Saint Patrick of Armagh (*ca.* 385–*ca.* 461),[3] Christianity had already gained a rather tenuous exis-

[2] The Orthodox Church commemorates him on May 21.

[3] The Orthodox Church commemorates him on March 17.

tence. The state of monasticism in the Celtic lands of that time, if it existed in any organized form, is largely unknown. We can, however, surmise that owing to the remarkably widespread monasticism that we encounter in the sixth century, a period of time from which we have the first substantial historical sources, at least some monastic seeds had already been planted in the fifth century by Saint Patrick and his followers. Moreover, although Saint Patrick himself is often represented as a man with no ties to, or influence on, monasticism whatsoever, this is in total contradiction to the historical and literary sources and, hence, simply untenable. Unfortunately, this false assumption has clouded much of the historical thought about this period, leaving our knowledge of the development of the sixth-century Celtic Church in more a state of confusion than is necessary. Indeed, it is more likely that, after his birth in Western Britain (contemporary Wales), Saint Patrick spent his formative years, spiritually speaking, in Gaul—certainly at Auxerre, perhaps also at Lérins.[4] His own writings bear this out.

But, as we have stated, what we mainly wish to trace in this study are those Eastern, and primarily Egyptian, influences on both the internal forms (such as monastic spirituality) and external forms (such as liturgics and Christian art) of Celtic monasticism. We will specifically note some of these remarkable similarities; determine exactly from where in the East these influences derived; and, finally, consider whether this influence was mainly direct or indirect. As regards the latter, we can be fairly certain that if this Oriental influence came through a Western European medium, Gaul is the only real possibility. Some have pointed to the possibility of the Church in Britain as a source of influence, but in the opinion of many historians, this is unlikely. The fifth and sixth centuries in British ecclesiastical life were a time of decay,

[4] Nora K. Chadwick, *The Age of the Saints in the Early Celtic Church* (London: 1961), p. 24.

both externally and internally.[5] That such a Church could have been the center of spiritual influence outside of its borders is hardly probable.[6] Further, we will avoid the mistake some make of artificially separating the "Irish" from the "Scottish" Churches. The two are rather a cultural and ethnic unit, allowing, of course, for some variation locally. Hence, the monasticism of places such as Candida Casa and Lindisfarne is an integral part of the Celtic Church with which we will deal. This does need to be qualified in one sense, however, for we are not speaking of an administrative unity, here, but rather of a unity of religious life. (Indeed, such administrative unity cannot be found locally in the Church in Ireland proper at this time!)

We might also mention, in passing, the possibility of Spain as an intermediary between East and West. Although some aspects of Eastern influence on Church life in Hibernia may indeed have derived from Spain—ecclesiastical art is one example—, there are not to be found any indications of the sort of thriving monastic life in Spain which would have been necessary in order to have such a considerable effect on Celtic monasticism.

Thus, Gaul remains a possible major source of Eastern influence on Celtic monasticism. In the final analysis, Gallic monasticism itself was directly influenced by the East. Therefore, the idea that such Oriental themes came through Gaul appears at first sight attractive indeed, if one recalls that Saint Patrick probably received his monastic training in Gaul, and also that (as we shall see) the major source of Eastern influence on Celtic monasticism appears to have been Saint John Cassian the Roman (*ca.*

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[5] Heinrich Zimmer, *The Celtic Church in Britain and Ireland* (London: 1902), p. 65.

[6] Even in Wales, where some degree of spiritual life was in evidence, it may be noted that Welsh monasticism was not itself of the highly ascetic nature of that of the Celts, with their leanings toward anchoritism, and hence cannot account for the Celtic "monastic Church" of the sixth century (*cf.* John T. McNeill, *The Celtic Churches*, *op. cit.,* p. 40).

360–435),[7] who ended his days in Southern Gaul in the early fifth century. Unfortunately, this issue is not quite so simple or so straightforward. Firstly, Gallic monasticism may have been subject to some degree of local variation. Secondly, it is often difficult to define what is meant by "direct influence." If Saint Cassian's writings on Egyptian monasticism were simply deposited in Hibernia without Gallic intermediaries, but also without Egyptian monastics present to supervise the proper understanding and application of the monastic precepts contained in these writings, then how "direct" is this influence? How much were such writings changed to fit local circumstances and needs, either by Gallic or Egyptian monastics, or by the Celts themselves? Or, if it was through monastics from Gaul that Oriental monastic writings came into the Celtic lands, then how pure is this Byzantine influence? This is a complicated and probably not completely resolvable question, because of the scantiness of any direct travel references. The best that can be done, and, indeed, what this study in a somewhat incomplete manner endeavors to do (incomplete because of the overwhelming nature of monastic sources that can be analyzed), is to explore monastic "rules" and "penitentials," lives of the Saints, liturgics, and ecclesiastical art; we will try to get at the very heart of monasticism and see what can be discovered of precise Eastern influences from a basic knowledge of the general characteristics of the various types of Oriental monasticism. Through this exploration of the best-known monastic writings of the Orthodox East and of the Celtic Church, we hope to offer some helpful insights and to clear up some of the common misunderstandings and misconceptions among many historians concerning this topic.

Finally, we encounter further difficulties when we try to categorize the various forms of Eastern Orthodox monasticism that have arisen historically. This is a complicated issue. Although we

[7] The Orthodox Church commemorates him on February 28 in common years and February 29 in leap years.

can generally point out certain characteristics of what one could call the monasticism of Egypt or of Palestine, these various types are not as clear-cut as they are in the later West, and we run the risk of creating artificial categories (Orthodoxy, for example, has never had the notion of separate "religious orders"). There is much overlapping and a mutual exchange of influences in Byzantine monasticism. In fact, when we speak of Coptic[8] monasticism, we have further to differentiate slightly between that of the Thebaïd or Upper Nile River (Southern Egypt) and that of the Lower Nile River in the proximity of Alexandria (Northern Egypt). Later, we will briefly describe the various types of Eastern monasticism according to geographic area. At this point, let us merely keep in mind the universal distinction between the three major forms that monastic life can assume: *cœnobitism*, life totally in common; *anchoritism* or *eremitism*, the life of a monastic solitary; and *semi-eremitism*, an intermediate form in which monastics spend most of their time alone, yet gather at certain times (usually twice a week or so) for common prayer. This last form, it seems, first assumed definite form in the λαύραι (*lavras*) of Palestine.[9] We shall make frequent reference to these three categories throughout this study.

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[8] "Copt" is an Anglicization of the Arabic *qubt*, from the Coptic *gyptios* or *kyptaios*, which is itself derived from the Greek Αἰγύπτιοι, "Egyptians." Thus, following standard scholarly convention, we use the word "Coptic" throughout this study as synonymous with "Egyptian," *i.e.,* as a general term indicating the ethnic descendants of ancient (pre-Christian) Egyptians and their distinct Afro-Asiatic tongue (now dead, save for liturgical usage). As such, our use of "Coptic" should *not* be confused with its more common popular meaning as a specific term designating Egyptian Monophysites, *viz.,* members of the so-called Coptic Orthodox Church, a heretical body of Christians which has been cut off from Eastern Orthodox Christianity for many centuries.

[9] Derwas J. Chitty, *The Desert a City* (Crestwood, NY: 1966), pp. 15–16, 69, 72, 168; George Fedotov, *The Russian Religious Mind*, (Belmont, MA: 1975), Vol. I, p. 114.

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