

# The Imagination of Interconnection: Laudato Si' and Celtic Christian Spirituality

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Article abstract

This article brings Pope Francis's encyclical on the environment, *Laudato Si': On Care for Our Common Home*, into conversation with the modern spiritual movement of Celtic Christian spirituality, arguing that its contribution to Francis' concept of an "integral ecology lived out joyfully and authentically" is its placing the imagination at the heart of interconnectivity. The paper will begin with a description of Francis' concept of integral ecology, outlining its biblical foundations and spiritual import. Then it will introduce the recent movement in 'Celtic' Christian spirituality, arguing how, despite strong criticisms from Celtic scholars, it remains an important and influential spiritual movement that speaks to the concerns, aspirations, and insights of many people within contemporary Christian culture. One of those insights is in the role of the imagination in understanding humanity's relation to its environment, which will be explored through the movement's engagement with Alexander Carmichael's *Carmina Gadelica*. And finally, the article will conclude with how the emphasis on the imagination links to contemporary understandings of the religious imagination and how its liberating and concretizing function can serve as a psychological and theological precondition for the incarnational principle of social justice as found in Oscar Romero's address, "The Political Dimension of the Faith from the Perspective of the Option for the Poor."

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# The Imagination of Interconnection: *Laudato Si'* and Celtic Christian Spirituality

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*Kevin Frederick Vaughan*

## Introduction

Pope Francis' encyclical letter, *Laudato Si': On Care of Our Common Home*,<sup>1</sup> is an uncommon document on the environmental crisis, for it not only outlines the social, political, and scientific dimensions of the problem, but also examines the problem from theological and spiritual dimensions. These various dimensions are all integrated for Francis, with the former showing themselves to be expressions of the latter. Environmentally risky and irresponsible government policies or business practices reveal more than just poor political and business acumen. They reveal a deeply problematic vision that places humanity in isolation, indifference, competition, and dominance over the environment. The human person, then, is not only *in* the world's crisis, but *of* it too. At its deepest level it is a spiritual crisis, a crisis of vision involving humanity's fundamental stance before reality.

In response, Francis offers a vision of his own, one that integrates the human subject into the larger environment, which includes not only the social and natural spheres, but the theological and spiritual as well. Only a vision of an "integral ecology" can steer humanity away from the values and attitudes that have been contributing to the environmental crisis. To construct this vision, Francis draws on contemporary scientific studies, as well as the theological and spiritual wisdom of the Christian tradition. In fact, after outlining the ecological crisis in the first chapter, Francis begins to construct his vision with a chapter devoted to Scripture and to the ecological commitments grounded therein. In the final chapter on education and spirituality, Francis addresses the need for "ecological conversion", a conversion from a vision of consumerism to one of integration. For this conversion he offers a number of aids, such as the practice of the sacraments, the Trinitarian concept of God, and the devotion to Mary and saints such as Francis of Assisi, Bonaventure, and John of the Cross. All of these theological and spiritual resources are meant to motivate humanity to adopt the requisite attitudes necessary for ecological conversion.

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<sup>1</sup>Pope Francis, *Laudato Si'*: Encyclical Letter of the Holy Father Francis on Care for our Common Home (Vatican City: VA: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 18 June 2015), accessed 7 June 2018, [http://w2.vatican.va/content/dam/francesco/pdf/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco\\_20150524\\_enciclica-laudato-si\\_en.pdf](http://w2.vatican.va/content/dam/francesco/pdf/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si_en.pdf).

Pope Francis is not alone in his call for an ecological conversion. In fact, this and other concerns mentioned in the encyclical can be found in the recent revival of interest in so-called Celtic Christian spirituality. Over the last 70 years, a movement has emerged claiming inspiration from Celtic Christian sources for addressing a host of contemporary spiritual concerns, one of which is humanity's proper relationship with the natural world. Within this movement, Celtic Christianity, whether ancient, medieval or modern, is understood as representing an authentic Christian attitude towards the natural world that stands in sharp contrast to modern attitudes of industrialization and consumerism. In this way, Celtic Christianity stands as an invaluable source for developing a creation-centered spirituality that addresses the current ecological crisis.<sup>2</sup> In this paper, I will bring Pope Francis into conversation with this movement, arguing that its contribution to an "integral ecology lived out joyfully and authentically"<sup>3</sup> is its placing the imagination at the heart of interconnectivity. I will begin with a description of Francis' concept of integral ecology, outlining its biblical foundations and spiritual import. Then I will introduce the recent movement in Celtic Christian spirituality, demonstrating how, despite strong criticisms from Celtic scholars, it remains an important and influential spiritual movement that speaks to the concerns, aspirations, and insights of many people within contemporary Christian culture. One of those insights is in the role of the imagination in understanding humanity's relation to its environment, which I will demonstrate through the movement's engagement with the *Carmina Gadelica*, a nineteenth-century collection of Scottish Gaelic poems, hymns, and incantations, a foundational source-text for the movement.<sup>4</sup> And finally, I will conclude with how the emphasis on the imagination links to contemporary understandings of the religious imagination and how its liberating and concretizing function can serve as a psychological and theological precondition for the incarnational principle of social justice as found in Oscar Romero's address, "The Political Dimension of the Faith from the Perspective of the Option for the Poor."

### **Francis' Integral Ecology**

To understand the vision of an integral ecology called for by Francis, we must say something about the opposing vision that lies at the heart of the environmental crisis. Francis believes that much of humanity has forgotten its interconnection with the rest of life, and that this has led to

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<sup>2</sup>Ian Bradley outlines three influential sources within this movement, including his own book, *The Celtic Way* (1993), in which "Celtic Christianity" is put forth as an eco-friendly form of Christianity. Ian Bradley, "How Green was Celtic Christianity?" *Ecotheology: Journal of Religion, Nature & The Environment* 5, no. 4 (January 1998): 60.

<sup>3</sup>Laudato Si', #10.

<sup>4</sup>Alexander Carmichael, *Carmina Gadelica: Hymns and Incantations with Illustrative Notes on Words, Rites, and Customs, Dying and Obsolete: Orally Collected in the Highlands and Islands of Scotland and Translated into English*, (Edinburgh: Floris Books, 2006).

an attitude and practice of dominance over it.<sup>5</sup> He contrasts the current sense of disconnect with the account of the creation narrative in Genesis. According to Francis' reading, Genesis describes the human creature as endowed with the self-directing powers of free-will and reason, and yet not set adrift within "a world ruled by pure chance or endlessly recurring cycles."<sup>6</sup> Instead, humanity finds itself at home within a larger panoply of creation, which serves the various purposes with which God created it.

Francis understands the biblical creation narrative as fostering a vision of an integral ecology. The purposes of the human creature are not set in opposition to the purposes of the rest of creation. Instead, they find a common home in the will of the creator God. Any disconnection from this context will manifest itself in ways unhealthy to humanity and to the rest of creation. To lose one's context is to lose one's home and to lose the stability and peace that word entails.<sup>7</sup> This loss happens on a fundamental level for humanity, which replaces the peaceful home of God's creation with an anxious struggle against opposing purposes. The freedom and purposes of the rest of creation are no longer seen as affirming human dignity. Instead, the God-given gifts of "self-knowledge" and "self-possession" are used to assert human dignity forcefully on an environment seen as hostile and indifferent to human worth. At its root, then, the present environmental crisis is the result of humanity's attempt to recast the original purposes of God's creation according to the self-asserting designs of humanity.<sup>8</sup>

For Francis, then, humanity's responsibility to the environment is not just an ethical one, but a cosmic one, where the very integrity of creation and humanity's place within it are at stake. Chapter four on integral ecology is an outline of how humanity can begin to restore its context, and how the natural environment is a constituent ingredient in who the human person is. Francis begins the chapter with the scientific definition of ecology as the study of "the relationship between living organisms and the environment in which they develop."<sup>9</sup> He has more than just the modern scientific understanding in mind here. To study the human organism and its environment is to take into consideration the analysis of the biblical material in chapter two. The human person is more than just a biological organism, although it is that. Humanity includes dimensions unique to it as a creature understood according to its proper theological meaning. These dimensions include not only the social, political, economic, and cultural, but

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<sup>5</sup>*Laudato Si'*, #2.

<sup>6</sup>*Ibid.*, #65.

<sup>7</sup>"The current global situation engenders a feeling of instability and uncertainty, which in turn becomes 'a seedbed for collective selfishness.'" *Ibid.*, #204.

<sup>8</sup>Later in the encyclical, Francis places anxiety at the heart of the consumerist vision: "Jesus was completely present to everyone and to everything, and in this way he showed us the way to overcome that unhealthy anxiety which makes us superficial, aggressive and compulsive consumers." *Ibid.*, #226.

<sup>9</sup>*Ibid.*, #138.

also the religious, spiritual, and natural. The study of human ecology, therefore, is not just a scientific discipline, but also a holistic discipline by which one studies the fundamental unity of the many dimensions of what it means to be human. It is with this understanding that Francis calls for “a humanism capable of bringing together the different fields of knowledge, including economics, in the service of a more integral and integrating vision.”<sup>10</sup>

The vision Francis calls for is resonant, he believes, with Christianity, especially with the biblical, theological, and spiritual sources outlined in chapters and five of the encyclical. Humanity’s relationship with the rest of creation is marked by an almost familial bond, and a respect for the freedom and purposes of all creation built into it by a common source. It is this sort of vision that can support, sustain, and inspire just and equitable policies for the environment.

Throughout the encyclical, Francis uses the image of a gift to describe his vision.<sup>11</sup> For Francis, a gift is not reduced to the needs or demands of the receiver, but respects the giver’s intentions as well. You cannot receive the gift of a hat only to use it as a garbage can. In this way, the term gift implies gratuity, independence, and responsibility. Creation understood as a gift is contrasted with the utilitarian model: “Since the world has been given to us, we can no longer view reality in a purely utilitarian way, in which efficiency and productivity are entirely geared to our individual benefit.”<sup>12</sup> The utilitarian model reduces the rest of creation to human purposes and desires. By contrast, Francis quotes the Portuguese bishops: “The environment is part of a logic of receptivity. It is on loan to each generation, which must then hand it on to the next.”<sup>13</sup> It is this broader vision that marks an integral ecology for Francis,<sup>14</sup> and radically affects our consciousness and conduct. Francis tells us he is “speaking of an attitude of the heart, one which approaches life with serene attentiveness, which is capable of being fully present to someone without thinking of what comes next, which accepts each moment as a gift from God to be lived to the full.”<sup>15</sup>

And it is this attitude that permeates every aspect of life, from crafting government policies to the everyday actions of the individual. Following St. Thérèse de Lisieux, Francis explains, “an integral ecology is also made up of simple daily gestures which break with the logic of violence, exploitation and selfishness. In the end, a world of exacerbated consumption is at the same time a world which mistreats life in all its forms.”<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>10</sup>Ibid., #141.

<sup>11</sup>See *Laudato Si'*, #s 5, 155, 159, 220, and 226-7.

<sup>12</sup>Ibid., 159.

<sup>13</sup>Ibid.

<sup>14</sup>Ibid.

<sup>15</sup>Ibid., #226.

<sup>16</sup>Ibid., #230.

This vision, Francis believes, is affirmed by scientific data. The ongoing research into ecosystems and their interconnectivity reveals how humanity depends on systems beyond the human. This realization will in turn make “many people realize that we live and act on the basis of a reality which has previously been given to us, which precedes our existence and our abilities.”<sup>17</sup> Although scientists may be loath to describe the environment in terms of a gift, scientific research appears to confirm the theological conviction that reality cannot be reduced to human needs or demands. It is a vision of the world as connected to, but not determined by, humanity.

### **The Recent Revival in “Celtic” Christian Spirituality**

In the encyclical, Francis understands the papal teaching on environmental issues as having echoes within various segments of the Catholic Church and society, “all of which have enriched the Church’s thinking on these questions.”<sup>18</sup> Such echoes may be found in the recent revival in Celtic Christian spirituality over the last 70 years, which could enrich Francis’ understanding of an integral ecology. This revival of interest in Celtic spirituality is a broad and wide ranging movement, one that spans theological and confessional divides and has permeated academic and popular cultures alike.<sup>19</sup> I will first outline the basic characteristics of this movement, drawing parallels with Pope Francis’ encyclical. I will then offer a critical assessment of its relationship to Celtic scholarship, as well as its status as a modern form of spirituality.

How this movement came about is a story too long to tell in its entirety here. In fact, Ian Bradley identifies it as the last of six Celtic revival movements.<sup>20</sup> The current movement in Celtic Christian spirituality took on full form in the 1980s, alongside its New Age and neopagan counterparts, but its beginnings lie in the 1960s with the publication of a number of influential anthologies of prayers pulled from Alexander Carmichael’s *Carmina Gadelica*. According to Ian Bradley, these anthologies not only made access to these prayers more affordable and accessible, they “also presented Celtic prayers not as literary texts of quaint examples of folklore but as aids to personal spiritual devotion.”<sup>21</sup> The authors of these anthologies were unaware that they would become source material for a modern spiritual movement. This movement emerged with the appearance of a number of influential works, such as Esther de Waal’s and Donald Allchin’s *Threshold of Life*, a collection of “Prayers and Praises from the

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<sup>17</sup>Ibid., #140.

<sup>18</sup>Ibid., #7.

<sup>19</sup>“The modern appeal of Celtic spirituality now extends across both the theological and denominational spectrum, and well beyond the company of Christian believers.” Ian Bradley, *The Celtic Way*, (London: Darton Longman & Todd, 2003), vii-viii.

<sup>20</sup>Ian Bradley, *Celtic Christianity: Making Myths and Chasing Dreams*, (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press 1999), viii, quoted in Jacqueline Borsje, “The Secret of the Celts Revisited,” *Religion & Theology* 24, no. 1-2 (2017): 136.

<sup>21</sup>Ibid., 190.

Celtic Tradition” published in 1986, which highlight the devotional benefit of so-called Celtic sources for contemporary Christians. “To read the *Carmina Gadelica*,” de Waal claims, “is not merely to be transported back into a vanished world. It is to be given a vision of a world which still lies to hand, a gift waiting for us if we should choose to take it.”<sup>22</sup> Within this movement, according to Bradley, Celtic spirituality “could now stand alongside devotional ‘greats’ like Dame Julian of Norwich and St. John of the Cross.”<sup>23</sup>

Rosemary Power, in *The Celtic Quest: A Contemporary Spirituality*, lists eleven defining characteristics of the movement. Among them she includes an “interest in nature, seasonal practices and the experience of the divine as immanent,” linked closely to “a desire to respect the environment;” and a “belief that the ancient Celtic peoples lived in harmony with the natural world, and with each other.”<sup>24</sup> Like Pope Francis, this movement sees the modern culture as marked by an attitude of dominance over the natural world. The spirituality of the Celtic peoples, according to this movement, offers an alternative vision, one that often carries with it a sense of entanglement with the natural world. This view of Celtic culture led Bradley in his initial study of Celtic Christianity to use the Celtic knot as a programmatic image “where everything on earth and in heaven is interconnected and interdependent and all is linked ultimately to God.”<sup>25</sup> This entanglement is also observed in illuminated manuscripts, like the *Book of Kells*, begun in the 8th century on the island of Iona, which contains illustrations of flora and fauna, complex patterns and designs, which entangle the word of God in the world of creation. The Celtic cross is another alleged source of this theme and interpreted as “the circle of creation, representing the earth and the sun, which surrounds and encompasses the cross of redemption.”<sup>26</sup> Within this movement, legends of the saints, are often used to bring out the reciprocal relationship between humanity and beasts.<sup>27</sup> Whether it be Kevin’s blackbird, Ciaran’s wild boar, or Columcille’s white horse, animals are seen as “fellow creatures of the earth, and once befriended, they become helpers to the saints.”<sup>28</sup>

Another resonance with Francis’ encyclical is the insistence on the distinction between God the Creator and God’s creation. Rosemary Power identifies orthodoxy as an important feature of

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<sup>22</sup> Esther de Waal, *The Celtic Vision*, (Darton, Longman & Todd, London, 1988), 14, quoted in Bradley, *Celtic Christianity*, 198.

<sup>23</sup> Bradley, *Celtic Christianity*, 198.

<sup>24</sup> Rosemary Power, *The Celtic Quest: A Contemporary Spirituality*, (Blackrock, Co Dublin: Columba Press 2010). 14. Oliver Davies understands the Christianity of the Celtic countries of the early Middle Ages as characterized by an autonomous understanding of nature. Oliver Davies, “Introduction,” in *Classics of Western Spirituality: Celtic Spirituality*, ed. and trans. Oliver Davies and Thomas O’Loughlin, (New York: Paulist Press 1999), 11.

<sup>25</sup> Bradley, *The Celtic Way*, 50.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 52.

<sup>27</sup> Edward Cletus Sellner, *Wisdom of the Celtic Saints* (Notre Dame, Indiana: Ave Maria Press, 1993), 22.

<sup>28</sup> Sellner, *Wisdom of the Celtic Saints*, 22.

the movement. Unlike its New Age and neopagan counterparts, Celtic Christian spirituality “has a strong focus on the Trinity, and while emphasizing the immanent presence of God in the individual and in the surrounding world, it never loses a sense of the transcendent.”<sup>29</sup> Philip Sheldrake emphasizes this when he distinguishes the theological understandings of Celtic Christians from their Celtic pagan forebears. According to Sheldrake, Celtic Christians were not interested in nature per se, but in nature as revealing of God. This represents a break from their pagan past, where an identity with nature would have been understood organically. With the coming of Christianity, Christian Celts found themselves between two poles: nature, of which they were a part, and life with God, to which they were moving.<sup>30</sup> If the unity is no longer organic, it is symbolic, with both humanity and the natural world representing a common creation, issuing from and moving towards the one God. This theological vision does not mitigate the harmony between humanity and the rest of creation. Humanity and the natural world are cooperators in God’s larger plan of creation, both of which enjoy God’s blessings and their own created purposes. This can be seen in Noel Dermot O’Donoghue’s reading of the Breastplate of St. Patrick, an ancient Celtic protection prayer, which invokes the powers of nature in its own right alongside that of God and angels.

For my shield this day I call:

Heaven’s might

Sun’s brightness

Moon’s whiteness.

Fire’s glory

Lightning’s swiftness

Wind’s wildness

Ocean’s depth

Earth’s solidity

Rock’s immobility.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>29</sup>Power, *The Celtic Quest*, 17.

<sup>30</sup>“People still felt themselves to be part of nature but at the same time realised their alienation from it. The link between was no longer organic but symbolic.” Philip Sheldrake, *Living Between Worlds: Place and Journey in Celtic Spirituality*, (Boston: Cowley Pubns; Darton, Longman & Todd, 1995), 73.

<sup>31</sup>Noel Dermot O’Donoghue, “Celtic Creation Spirituality,” *The Month* 251 (1990): 420.



The theological dimension brings with it a new kind of unity. For the Celts, all of creation and not just humanity have God as their source and final goal. All creatures are beloved gifts of God and fellow sojourners on the path to God.

Francis and the Celtic Christian spirituality movement also share the view of creation as a gift. O'Donoghue understands the giftedness of creation as the central idea of Celtic creation spirituality. Gift is a dynamic and even paradoxical concept for O'Donoghue, simultaneously connoting loss and gain. He bases his reflections on his experiences growing up on a farm in County Kerry, Ireland in the early 20th century, an experience which he believes resonates with the hymns and prayers of Carmichael's *Carmina Gadelica*. Two people stand out for him, both of whom reflect the dynamic concept of gift. The first is a mother, Mary Casey, who upon hearing the news of the death of her two sons by drowning uttered the prayer, "Blessed be the holy will of God." The other, an older gentleman, Michael Sullivan, who had debilitating arthritis, and who would say everyday as he passed by the O'Donoghue farm, "Tis a fine day, thank God," or "Tis a wild day, thank God."<sup>32</sup> O'Donoghue observes here more than just courtesy or resignation, but the voice of a people who "had survived the dark centuries and such holocaust experiences as the Irish Famine; survived, like Job, still giving thanks to the Creator and the sources of life."<sup>33</sup> What these cases attest to, for O'Donoghue, is an understanding of creation as a "costly" gift. It is costly precisely because creation never ceases to be a gift. It never becomes solely the possession of the receiver, but maintains an essential link to the giver, who is God. This gratuitous nature of creation implies a certain freedom and autonomy to all things. Nothing can be reduced to our purposes, but must be respected for the purposes that lie ultimately with God. O'Donoghue understands the Celtic relationship with nature as a kind of friendship that respected the integrity and freedom of the natural world.<sup>34</sup>

Understood in terms of friendship and the freedom it implies, the paradoxical nature of creation as a gift can be understood. To love someone is to respect their freedom, thereby opening yourself up in vulnerability to their freedom to fail you. But therein lies the blessing, since it is a tacit reminder that fulfillment is found beyond the sphere of one's own self-concern. In O'Donoghue's examples, Mary and Michael were able to bless the day despite their sufferings, because the freedom to suffer mysteriously and frighteningly implied their freedom to love. What keeps one from sinking into despair is the divine perspective, a perspective that holds the ancient love as ever new in the renewing fires of forgiveness.

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<sup>32</sup>Ibid., 418.

<sup>33</sup>Ibid.

<sup>34</sup>O'Donoghue links Celtic creation spirituality to the ancient practice of "mystical friendship." See Ibid., 422-3.

## **Celtic Christian Spirituality: Myth and Reality**

One of the peculiarities of the Celtic Christian Spirituality movement is its loose connection to Celtic sources. Rosemary Power explains that the anthologies of the 1960s, 70s, and 80s became the source material for future authors who had little understanding of the original cultures from which the so-called Celtic sources were drawn, and probably no knowledge of the original languages. In fact, future authors were hampered by the fact that earlier authors were unconcerned to distinguish the types of sources used, whether ancient, medieval, or modern, treating them as part of a continuous spectrum. Neither did they always distinguish between original sources and poetic reconstructions. The result was repetition of the same themes. As Power explains, “the understanding of the themes snowballed as new writers, seeing the same views repeated, took them as being true to the original sources rather than recent reflections upon them.”<sup>35</sup>

This has led to a strong critique by scholars of Celtic culture and literature. Donald Meek wrote a scathing review of this movement and its uncritical usage of Celtic sources in his *The Quest for Celtic Christianity*. Most scholars follow suit. In fact, such scholarly criticism, especially from Meek, led Ian Bradley, the author of one of the most influential books of the movement, to adopt a more critical attitude towards it and to distance himself from his earlier work, a process not without pain, he tells us.<sup>36</sup> The scholarly criticism, which is copious, follows along two lines: the uncritical use of sources and the imposition of contemporary spiritual themes and concerns. A good example is the widespread claim that so-called Celtic attitudes towards nature were positive and friendly. Although evidence may be found of an affirmative view of nature, just as much if not more can be found of an attitude of fear and enmity. Ian Bradley in an exercise of *mea culpa* points out how “some of the oldest and most authentic Irish sources from the age of the saints express more than anything else a fear of the physical elements.”<sup>37</sup> He admits that “early Irish Christian poems do undoubtedly reflect a real respect for the physical world, and a sense of awe and wonder in the face of the magnificence and mystery of creation,” but they reflect “a strong sense also of the fallen state of the physical world and of its need for redemption.”<sup>38</sup> Nor is such a respect for the world uniquely Celtic, but can be found throughout much of ancient and medieval Christianity.<sup>39</sup> Another difficulty is the use of the *Carmina Gadelica*, which Donald Meek calls “the corner-stone of modern ‘Celtic Christianity.’”<sup>40</sup> Carmichael’s work is an impressive achievement, but it fails as a source book for establishing

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<sup>35</sup>Power, *The Celtic Quest*, 86.

<sup>36</sup>Bradley, *Celtic Christianity*, ix.

<sup>37</sup>Bradley, “How Green was Celtic Christianity?,” 63.

<sup>38</sup>*Ibid.*, 4.

<sup>39</sup>Praise of God’s creation may be found throughout much of Scripture, as in Psalms 8, 19 and 139.

<sup>40</sup>Donald Meek, *The Quest for Celtic Christianity*, (Edinburgh: Handsel Press, 2000), 66.

the green credentials of Celtic Christians. As Bradley points out, the problem is that these poems were compiled in the nineteenth century, and “there is no evidence that they articulate an approach which stretches back to the golden age of ‘Celtic Christianity’ in the sixth and seventh centuries.”<sup>41</sup> Without solid footing in the primary sources of Celtic literature and culture, the proponents of a “green” Celtic Christianity are imposing the environmental concerns of late twentieth and early twenty-first century Christians on Christians from earlier eras.

To what extent, then, does the current revival of Celtic Christian spirituality correspond to the literary and cultural artifacts of Celtic cultures of the past is a question I will have to bracket. But in light of this scholarly critique, there are two consequences for any serious engagement with the movement. First, it must be acknowledged that it has only a loose connection to the Celtic cultures of the past and, therefore, cannot be taken tout court as representative of the native Christian communities of Ireland, Wales, Scotland, Cornwall and Brittany in the early Middle Ages. To what extent individual claims correspond to historical sources, will of course depend upon rigorous scholarly research. Secondly, if the movement is to be addressed as a legitimate spiritual movement, it must be recognized as a modern movement, representing modern concerns and working within modern presuppositions.

But why take seriously a spiritual movement that makes problematic historical claims? One response to this question is that despite the scholarly critique, the recent revival in Celtic Christian spirituality remains an influential and thriving modern spiritual movement. In her study of the movement, Rosemary Power observes, “Yet, with all these limitations, Celtic Christianity speaks to a large number of people who take it as real and suited to the western world today. It seems to touch aspects of people’s spiritual lives that are not being fed by the churches.”<sup>42</sup> Jacqueline Borsje considers it part of a larger process of renewal for Christians, and observes that “the popularity of the “Celts” today is part of a wider countermovement in which alternatives for parts of the current dominant culture are sought. Old(er) traditions concerning pre-Christian and Christian “Celts” are invested with a new meaning that emphasise the alternative reaction. We could compare this process with the contemporary use of the term “spirituality,” which is often employed to indicate an alternative to dominant official religions, both as a tool for criticism and as a source of inspiration on how to live a good life. Modern spirituality or religious movements thus search for pre-Christian and/or Christian European roots and predecessors.”<sup>43</sup> Thomas O’Loughlin reinforces the legitimacy of turning to past ages to address concerns of the present by pointing out precedents within the Christian tradition:

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<sup>41</sup>Bradley, “How Green was Celtic Christianity?,” 65.

<sup>42</sup>Power, *The Celtic Quest*, 143.

<sup>43</sup>Borsje, “The Secret of the Celts Revisited,” 152.

“The attempt to recover a new purity through going back to the past can be seen in the composition of Deuteronomy at the time of Josiah’s reforms, in Luke’s myth of a pristine early community, in many ‘reform’ movements in monasticism, and in the quest for ‘the purity of Celtic Christianity’.”<sup>44</sup>

Francis in his encyclical points out that his vision stands in a line with recent papal teaching on the environment and social justice. This same papal teaching has espoused the need for dialogue with modern culture. John Paul II, in fact, established the Pontifical Council for Culture to do just that, and instructed it “to give the whole Church, both its leaders and the faithful, a strong incentive to become aware of the duty that is incumbent upon all to listen carefully to modern man, not in order to approve all of his behaviour, but rather in order to discover first of all his latent hopes and aspirations.”<sup>45</sup> Francis himself points out that culture is not just something that is inherited, but “it is also, and above all, a living, dynamic and participatory present reality, which cannot be excluded as we rethink the relationship between human beings and the environment.”<sup>46</sup>

There is also a theological argument for taking Celtic Christian spirituality seriously. Although Christianity has a longstanding commitment to rational inquiry, Christian spirituality is ultimately judged not on the basis of its scholarship, but on the fruits it bears for the Christian life. Ian Bradley, in his book *Colonies of Heaven: Celtic Models for Today’s Church*, a book which incorporates scholarly criticisms of the movement, admits that his ultimate concern is not to present models that will satisfy Celtic scholars, but to present models that help “advance the Kingdom of God” and to help Christians “walk in closer imitation of Christ.”<sup>47</sup> Rosemary Power advances a similar argument. She asks the question, “Can the historically wrong be theologically right?” and, speaking of the proponents of Celtic Christian spirituality, concludes that

“if they raise conscience about how we treat the world and our neighbor, they are presumably a tool of the divine, even if their current usage would have been

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<sup>44</sup>Thomas O’Loughlin, *Journeys on the Edges: The Celtic Tradition* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 2000), 28. Elsewhere, O’Loughlin has argued that the difficulty with the origins of “Celtic” Christian spirituality “makes it more interesting as a subject for theological observation, since, if it is diverse in origins, content, and motivating desires, then it may tell us something about our religious mind-set at this time in the way that the study of an organized network or movement would not.” Thomas O’Loughlin, “‘Celtic Spirituality,’ Ecumenism, and Contemporary Religious Landscape.” *Irish Theological Quarterly* 67, no. 2 (2002): 153.

<sup>45</sup>John Paul II, *The Church and Culture*, (Vatican City, VA: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 13 January 1983), #5, accessed 7 May 2018, [http://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/pontifical\\_councils/cultr/documents/rc\\_pc\\_cultr\\_doc\\_20000126\\_jp-ii\\_addresses-pccultr\\_en.html#1](http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/cultr/documents/rc_pc_cultr_doc_20000126_jp-ii_addresses-pccultr_en.html#1).

<sup>46</sup>*Laudato Si’*, #143.

<sup>47</sup>“Whether they are ‘Celtic’ or not (whatever that means) ultimately does not matter. What does matter is whether they work, whether they speak to people today as authentic, honest and helpful, and above all whether they help to advance the Kingdom of God and to make us walk in closer imitation of Christ.” Ian Bradley, *Colonies of Heaven: Celtic Models for Today’s Church* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd Ltd., 2000), x.

incomprehensible to the original composers. If within Christian circles the “Celtic” has become a metaphor for holistic and environmentally sensitive behaviour, which assists people to make the connections between individuals’ actions and the health of the planet, this must be a valid path for contemporary Christians even if it had no historical part in the shaping of the source material.”<sup>48</sup>

### **The Imagination of Interconnectivity**

It is with the understanding of Celtic Christian spirituality as a modern spiritual movement, employing “Celtic” as a term for a host of modern concerns and presuppositions, that I turn to the role of imagination.<sup>49</sup> A characteristic of this movement alongside a devotion to the natural world is an emphasis on the role of creativity and imagination.<sup>50</sup> The artistic achievements of the Celtic peoples -- poetry, song, manuscript illumination, metalwork, and stone carving -- are seen as not simply decoration or adornment, but a vital ingredient in the Celtic Christian way of life. Esther de Waal finds the Celtic imagination deeply embedded within fundamental images drawn from nature that speak not just to Christians but to the common human condition regardless of religious affiliation.<sup>51</sup> Here, the symbolic unity between humanity and nature is given voice, unfolding the Christian faith within a vernacular literature and encounter with the natural world, all the while integrating that encounter into a Christian worldview. This imaginative and integrative vision is most evident in readings of Carmichael’s *Carmina Gadelica*. Here, attitudes towards the environment are expressed in images drawn from the chores and rhythms of daily life, fostering and nurturing the attitudes called for by Pope Francis in an integral ecology: an awareness of our interconnectivity with the rest of creation; gratitude for God’s loving gift of creation; and the humility to use our God-given capacities responsibly for the benefit of all creation.<sup>52</sup> I will demonstrate this with a reading of the select prayers from Carmichael’s collection as interpreted by three important representatives of the Celtic Christian spirituality movement, Esther de Waal, Ian Bradley, in his initial work on Celtic Christianity, and Noel Dermot O’Donoghue.

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<sup>48</sup>Power, *The Celtic Quest*, 150.

<sup>49</sup>Laura Béres takes a similar approach in reflecting upon “what needs people are attempting to meet through their current engagement with both Celtic spirituality and experiences with physical places like Iona.” Laura Béres, “Celtic Spirituality and Postmodern Geography,” *Journal For The Study of Spirituality* 2, no. 2 (2012): 181.

<sup>50</sup>Adrian Coyle “The Relationship between Adomnán of Iona’s *Life of St. Columba* and Celtic Christianity/Spirituality.” *Journal for the Study of Spirituality* 2, no. 1 (2012): 81; Davies, “Introduction,” 11; Power, *The Celtic Quest*, 14.

<sup>51</sup>De Waal, *Celtic Way of Prayer*, 36-7.

<sup>52</sup>*Laudato Si’*, #220.

The first example is a kindling prayer and is a favourite within the movement. Esther de Waal describes the context for this prayer as follows: “[A]t the start of each day, a woman would rise while her household was still asleep in order to lift the peats of the fire which she had banked down the night before. As the first flicker of flame reappears she makes it the occasion of a prayer for herself, her family, the whole world.”<sup>53</sup> The first stanza of that prayer<sup>54</sup> names the work and invokes the presence of the angels:

I will kindle my fire this morning  
In the presence of the holy angels of heaven,  
In the presence of Ariel of the loveliest form,  
In the presence of Uriel of the myriad charms,  
Without malice, without jealousy, without envy,  
Without fear, without terror of any one under the sun...

It then takes the form of a protection prayer:

But the Holy Son of God to shield me.  
Without malice, without jealousy, without envy,  
Without fear, without terror of any one under the sun,  
But the Holy Son of God to shield me.

Noel Dermot O’Donoghue points out that while protection prayers usually name the enemy from whom protection is required, like Satan and his demons, this prayer indicates that the enemy is an internal one, the negative thoughts and attitudes of the human heart.<sup>55</sup> Nestled between invocations of the Son of God’s shielding power, we have the darkness of the human heart, only to be illuminated by the love of God with the beginning of the second stanza:

God, kindle thou in my heart within  
A flame of love to my neighbour...

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<sup>53</sup>De Waal, *Celtic Way of Prayer*, 29-30.

<sup>54</sup>The prayer may be found in Carmichael, *Carmina Gadelica*, I: 231, quoted in de Waal, *Celtic Way of Prayer*, 30-31.

<sup>55</sup>Noel Dermot O’Donoghue, *The Mountain Behind the Mountain* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1993), 48.

The love of God begins to illumine the darkness of the soul, like the first flicker of flame begins to illumine the early morning hearth. And like fire, it begins to spread, reaching family and friends, eventually cutting across social barriers:

To my foe, to my friend, to my kindred all,  
To the brave, to the knave, to the thrall...

The prayer then connects one's own love with the love that sent the Son to a young Jewish girl those many years ago by introducing a new invocation, "O Son of the loveliest Mary". This invocation also signals a vertical movement to our love. Like the love of God that sent the Son to Mary, our love reaches to heights of heavenly glory and to the depths of the lowest creature:

O Son of the loveliest Mary,  
From the lowliest thing that liveth,  
To the Name that is highest of all.

O Son of the loveliest Mary,  
From the lowliest thing that liveth,  
To the Name that is highest of all.

Both O'Donoghue and de Waal understand this prayer as integrating the different levels of reality into a single daily chore. The slowly growing fire is a symbol of the spiritual growth of a Christian soul, as well as the very love of God, centered on the mystery of Christ and God's creation. God, Jesus, Mary, angels, fire, living things and the interior life are intimately bound together on the single image of the flame. To take one away would be to lose the others. In this way, the spiritual blends with the material, the heavenly with the earthly, the interior with the exterior, and the human with the natural. In the single image of fire, therefore, all of the various levels of the Christian universe are drawn into an interconnective whole. Reflecting on this same prayer, Ian Bradley compares it to the Celtic knot, a programmatic image for his study of Celtic Christianity, "where everything on earth and in heaven is interconnected and interdependent and all is linked ultimately to God."<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>56</sup>Bradley, *The Celtic Way*, 50.

The attitude of gratitude is also found in many prayers of Carmichael's collection and is closely associated with the idea of interconnectivity. In a morning prayer of thanksgiving,<sup>57</sup> God is portrayed as gift-giver:

Thanks to Thee, O God, that I have risen today,  
To the rising of this life itself;  
May it be to thine own glory, O God of every gift,  
And to the glory of my soul likewise.

In this first stanza, the economy of gift-exchange is rehearsed. Although one's life is surely one's own, it remains a gift of God and can never be divorced from God's purposes. Life, then, should glorify God as well as oneself. The prospect of death which overshadows this prayer is enough to make clear the contingency of God's gift and for the continual reliance on God for its maintenance.

As the prayer continues, the remaining two stanzas become imaginative exercises in integration:

O great God, aid Thou my soul  
With the aiding of Thine own mercy;  
Even as I clothe my body with wool,  
Cover Thou my soul with the shadow of Thy wing.

Help me to avoid every sin,  
And the source of every sin forsake;  
And as the mist scatters on the crest of the hills,  
May each ill haze clear from my soul, O God.

O'Donoghue points out how in the second stanza there is "a very perfect correspondence and unity of body and spirit, affirming not dualism but integration"<sup>58</sup> as God's internal aid of the

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<sup>57</sup>Carmichael, *Carmina Gadelica*, III: 31.

<sup>58</sup>O'Donoghue, *Mountain Behind the Mountain*, 49.



soul mirrors the external clothing of the body.<sup>59</sup> This correspondence is extended in the third and final stanza where the spiritual purification of the soul is mirrored in the processes of the natural world. Thanksgiving here is not merely a matter of an individual's attitude or disposition before God, but an embodied participation in the gift of creation and its many dimensions.

Running throughout the *Carmina Gadelica* can be seen a tenderness and humility before the natural world. Bradley reminds us that our English word humility is derived from *humus*, the Latin word for soil.<sup>60</sup> He tells us there is a term in Welsh for this sort of humility, *iselder*, which means "remaining down to earth and not making too much of yourself."<sup>61</sup> According to Bradley, for the Celtic Christians the calling of humility was "to keep ever in mind the close ties that bind us to the earth."<sup>62</sup> With such a concept of humility in mind, Bradley thinks we can understand St. Cuthbert's refusal to accept the royal gift of a horse in place of walking, because it brought him closer to the ground and to his people.<sup>63</sup>

Foreshadowing Pope Francis, Bradley states in *The Celtic Way* that this attitude of humility is badly needed today, where we have adopted an attitude of dominance through, what he calls, "a quite erroneous interpretation of God's commission to humankind in Genesis 1:28."<sup>64</sup> Instead, he sees the Celts taking their bearings from Mt 25:40, "Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me," applying it not just to the most vulnerable of humanity, but to all creatures as well. This compassion, Bradley says in the same work, came from their conviction that the divine presence can be found in all things. And it is in their prayers that this presence is imaginatively explored and nurtured.

There is no plant in the ground

But is full of His virtue,

There is no form in the strand

But is full of His blessing.

There is no life in the sea,

There is no creature in the river,

There is naught in the firmament,

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<sup>59</sup>Ibid.

<sup>60</sup>Bradley, *The Celtic Way*, 58.

<sup>61</sup>Ibid.

<sup>62</sup>Ibid.

<sup>63</sup>Ibid.

<sup>64</sup>Ibid.

But proclaims His goodness.

There is no bird on the wing,

There is no star in the sky,

There is nothing beneath the sun,

But proclaims his goodness.<sup>65</sup>

Of the representatives mentioned, O'Donoghue is the most philosophical. In fact, he attempts to construct an epistemology of what he believes is a distinctively "Celtic" way of perceiving the world. O'Donoghue argues that imagination was a key ingredient in the Celtic interpretation of the symbolic meaning of reality. More specifically, imagination afforded an intimation into transcendent meaning through its unique ability to combine sense data with abstract thought in a way that embodied the latter in the former. O'Donoghue draws parallels with whom he calls the "poets of nature", such as Gerard Manley Hopkins and William Wordsworth. What these poets demonstrate, according to O'Donoghue, is that on at least some occasions they go beyond the simple observation of nature and enter into "a kind of sharing of vision".<sup>66</sup> He interprets Hopkins' words, "What you look hard at seems to look hard at you," as Hopkins making "the startling statement that when a human perceiver looks carefully and steadily at something in nature that thing looks back at him."<sup>67</sup> To illustrate this kind of vision, O'Donoghue contrasts a botanist's view of a flower with that of a poet. A botanist sees the flower as an object of sense and intellect, something to be experienced and understood; while a poet sees it as something to be in a personal relationship with, in a way that "we sing and dance together in the glory of colour."<sup>68</sup> When the Highland woman sang the kindling prayer over the smoldering embers of the previous night's fire, she was not simply expressing preconceived notions of interconnectivity, but having an active engagement with it by way of her imagination.

One of the most distinctive features of imagination is the freedom it preserves in relation to the object imagined. According to O'Donoghue, there is a tendency today to see knowledge as a kind of possession, especially in those cases where categorization and definition become means

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<sup>65</sup>Carmichael, *Carmina Gadelica*, I, 39-41, quoted in *Ibid.*, 58-59.

<sup>66</sup>Noel Dermot O'Donoghue, *The Angels Keep Their Ancient Places* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2001), 30.

<sup>67</sup>Robert B. Martin, *Gerard Manley Hopkins* (Harper Collins, 1991), 203, quoted in O'Donoghue, *Mountain Behind the Mountain*, 62n22.

<sup>68</sup>O'Donoghue, *Angels Keep Their Ancient Places*, 30.

of manipulating and controlling our environment.<sup>69</sup> This is not the case with the imagination, where the image serves as a new object of consciousness drawn from both sense and intellect. Within imagination, sense and intellect come together to form a new object of consciousness, which must be allowed “to come and go in its own way, to preserve its own reticence and delicacy, to exercise a certain gentle control over our avid desire for knowledge as a possession, to calm and refresh the spirit rather than to end it into a spiral of questioning.”<sup>70</sup> Here, O’Donoghue displays a common characteristic of the Celtic Christian spiritual movement: the suspicion of an overly intellectual approach to life, especially with respect to matters of religion.<sup>71</sup>

O’Donoghue uses an analogy from dance to illustrate the relationship the subject has with its object in the imagination.<sup>72</sup> Imagination is to sense and intellect as a dance performance is to choreography and music. While the dancer respects the given patterns and rhythms, she is free to interpret them according to her own personality and experience, thereby internalizing the patterns, making a technically perfect performance musical, artistic, and truly her own. Imagination exercises a similar freedom in allowing the knower to freely interpret concepts and sense data by embodying them in images drawn from one’s personal experiences. With imagination, both sense and intellect are respected, but there is no question of dominance from either the side of the subject-object relationship. This fits well with the concept of creation as a gift, for it avoids an attitude of domination that can turn a gift into a possession.

It is this kind of imaginative relationship the Highland Scots of Carmichael’s *Carmina Gadelica* are understood to have had with the natural world. The kindling prayer represents the synthesising power of the imagination in its integration of daily chores, religious belief, and the powers of the five senses, to produce a *tertium quid*, in which to intimate the fundamental integrity and interconnectedness of the Christian universe, while never losing sight of the need for warmth in a Highland cottage home. According to Bradley, the symbolic unity that underlies this way of understanding creation is well suited to an even more ancient commitment to the power of words to lift the veil between this world and the next.<sup>73</sup> In fact, he speculates that perhaps such a commitment was behind the conclusion of a working party set up by the World Council of Churches in response to the environmental crisis, which determined that the most appropriate role for humanity to adopt before the rest of creation is that of a poet.<sup>74</sup>

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<sup>69</sup>O’Donoghue, *Mountain Behind the Mountain*, 34.

<sup>70</sup>*Ibid.*, 34.

<sup>71</sup>Power, *The Celtic Quest*, 15.

<sup>72</sup>O’Donoghue, *Angels Keep Their Ancient Places*, 30.

<sup>73</sup>For the priestly role exercised by poets in Celtic culture, see Bradley, *The Celtic Way*, 96.

<sup>74</sup>Bradley, *The Celtic Way*, 97.

## Faith and Imagination

It would be difficult to appreciate the import of the imaginative dimension of the Celtic Christian spirituality movement were it not for the recent interest in the religious imagination within philosophy and theology. The English Dominican theologian Aidan Nichols describes the very “history of the sense of God” as “a history of images – images generated by the urge of mind and heart to uncover the infinite in the finite, whether in nature, history, or moral or mystical experience.”<sup>75</sup> These “experiential epiphanies grasped by the imagination”<sup>76</sup> are at the heart of any formal understanding of Christian faith. Reason has an important role, but it is to explicate these epiphanies and “simply to consider the reasons for thinking that this imaginative sense of God truly attaches us to reality.”<sup>77</sup> And so, while reason is essential for the examination and even purification of religious images, at the end of the day, Nichols tells us, “the God of imagination always retains a certain priority. Without images of God there is nothing to criticize. No concept of God can emerge until these images have been provisionally accepted, and then tried and tested in the crucible of philosophy.”<sup>78</sup>

The poet and theologian Malcolm Guite argues that a renewed appreciation for imagination as a truth-bearing faculty will serve an important integrating function within our culture. According to Guite, ever since the Enlightenment, a view of knowledge that limits it to a narrow rationality has divorced reason from imagination.<sup>79</sup> This reductive position, he argues, “circumscribes the possibilities of both language and the world in ways that are not adequate to our actual experience of the rich and mysterious ambiguity of both.”<sup>80</sup> It has also contributed to profound ruptures in our culture, such as the rupture between knowledge and “*the language through which we know*”,<sup>81</sup> and the rupture between our own age and the wisdom of past ages “which was rooted in the idea that fables, stories, and myths were the medium that most completely embodied the deepest truths we need to know.”<sup>82</sup> But most profoundly for Guite, it occasioned a rupture between the immanent and transcendent. Since the seventeenth century, we have lived in a culture dominated by a “reductive science that pulled down over the windows of vision shutters bearing the bleak inscription ‘Nothing else.’”<sup>83</sup> In his work, Guite

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<sup>75</sup>Aidan Nichols, *Epiphany: A Theological Introduction to Catholicism* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1996), 14.

<sup>76</sup>*Ibid.*, 15.

<sup>77</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>78</sup>*Ibid.*, 14.

<sup>79</sup>Malcolm Guite, *Faith, Hope and Poetry: Theology and the Poetic Imagination* (Cambridge: Ashgate, 2011), 2.

<sup>80</sup>*Ibid.*, 6.

<sup>81</sup>*Ibid.*, 2. Emphasis in the original.

<sup>82</sup>*Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>83</sup>*Ibid.*, 243.

mines the poetic tradition to discover an imagination that mediates between the immanent and the transcendent, “as a window or gateway between distinct, but not divided, realms.”<sup>84</sup> His central question then is “[w]e have inherited a divided and dualistic culture, how can we set about reading poetry and engaging the poetic imagination in a way that will heal or restore lost vision?”<sup>85</sup>

The Cambridge philosopher Douglas Hedley has recently written a trilogy rehabilitating Coleridge’s concept of the imagination. Like Guite, he is uneasy about a view of knowledge that is reduced to the narrowly rational, a view that shuts out the irreducible creativity of human beings in which transcendent reality is indirectly apprehended by way of the inner eye of imagination.<sup>86</sup> Again like Guite, he sees the imagination as the mediator between the immanent and the transcendent, or the finite and the infinite; while like O’Donoghue he understands religion as grounded in intimations of the transcendent by way of imagination.<sup>87</sup> These similarities are no surprise when we notice the debt paid to Coleridge by all three authors. But Hedley also emphasises that Coleridge’s concept of imagination is one that engenders a consciousness of the world as a whole. This consciousness is a participation in it through an imaginative engagement.<sup>88</sup> Hedley contrasts this with models of knowledge understood according to the image of sight, like what Daniel Dennett has derisively called the “Cartesian Theatre.”<sup>89</sup> Such models, as Hans Jonas demonstrates, imply a distance between the subject and the observable world, encouraging us “to forget the dimension of ‘being-in-world’, our biological being, our primordial relation to the world that obviously precedes any perception or vision of them.”<sup>90</sup> For Coleridge, as for the Celtic Christian spirituality movement, the imagination does not allow such a distance. Humans are not just spectators of reality, because the imagination sees the world in its unity, which elicits an emotional response. This is different from what Coleridge calls fancy, which is “the mere reconstitution of items of memory into the

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<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.

<sup>86</sup> Douglas Hedley, *Living Forms of the Imagination* (London: T&T Clark, 2008), 1.

<sup>87</sup> “I have offered a defence of the Romantic view of religion as grounded in the intimation of the eternal, and the closely associated view of the centrality of the symbolic as a form of mediation between the finite and the infinite.” Hedley, *Living Forms*, 277.

<sup>88</sup> “Coleridge asserts that the ‘imagination at all events struggles to idealize and to unify’. The decisive contribution of the imagination is in our consciousness of the world as a whole. It is the participation and imaginative engagement with the whole that generates the specifically religious aspect.” Douglas Hedley, *The Iconic Imagination* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2016), 45.

<sup>89</sup> According to Dennett, this refers to “the illusion that there is a place in our brains where the show goes on, toward which all perceptual ‘input’ streams and whence flow all ‘conscious intentions’ to act and speak.” D. Dennett, *The Intentional Stance* (London: MIT Press, 1989), 346, quoted by Hedley, *Iconic Imagination*, 43.

<sup>90</sup> Hedley, *Iconic Imagination*, 45.

new set of relations.”<sup>91</sup> This is the self-conscious awareness of being in the world as in an “arena of free agency”.<sup>92</sup>

## **Imagination and Social Justice**

Since Francis adds environmental justice to the body of Catholic social teaching,<sup>93</sup> I would like to conclude with a brief look at the connection between the imagination of Celtic Christian spirituality and social justice. My point of departure for these reflections will be Oscar Romero’s address, “The Political Dimension of the Faith from the Perspective of the Option for the Poor,” delivered before the University of Louvain just weeks before his assassination in El Salvador. In this address, Romero articulated what I call the “incarnational principle” of the mission of the Church, namely that in order for the Church to live out its mission authentically, it must “incarnate” itself into the world of the poor in imitation of Jesus. And because this world is in fact socio-political, the Church must live out its mission on a socio-political level. For Romero, this involves not only preaching and providing aid, but something more profound:

I am talking about an authentic option for the poor, of becoming incarnate in their world, or proclaiming the good news to them, of giving them hope, of encouraging them to engage in a liberating praxis, of defending their cause and of sharing their fate.<sup>94</sup>

Romero reminds his audience of the Second Vatican Council’s *Dogmatic Constitution on the Church*, which teaches that the goal of “the essence of the church lies in its mission of service to the world, in its mission to save the world in its totality, and of saving it in history, here and now.”<sup>95</sup> According to the Council, the model for this service is Jesus himself, who showed a tender love for the suffering and the poor, sharing his message of salvation in humility and self-sacrifice to the point of persecution.<sup>96</sup> If the Church is to fulfill its mission, it must do the same.

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<sup>91</sup>Hedley, *Living Forms*, 52.

<sup>92</sup>Hedley, *Iconic Imagination*, 45.

<sup>93</sup>*Laudato Si’*, #15.

<sup>94</sup>Oscar Romero, “The Political Dimension of Faith from the Perspective of the Option for the Poor,” in *Voice of the Voiceless: The Four Pastoral Letters and Other Statements*, intro. Ignacio Martin-Baro and Jon Sobrino, trans. Michael J. Walsh (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1985), 182.

<sup>95</sup>Romero, “Political Dimension,” 178.

<sup>96</sup>“Just as Christ carried out the work of redemption in poverty and persecution, so the Church is called to follow the same route that it might communicate the fruits of salvation to men.” Second Vatican Council, *Lumen Gentium*, (Vatican City, VA: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 21 November 1964), #8, accessed 7 May, 2018, [http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist\\_councils/ii\\_vatican\\_council/documents/vat-ii\\_const\\_19641121\\_lumen-gentium\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19641121_lumen-gentium_en.html).

Romero's understanding of what it means to imitate Jesus, however, is a radical one. The imitation of Jesus, a longstanding spiritual practice within Christianity, should be understood as more than just imitating what Jesus did. It must extend also to what Jesus is, namely, the Incarnation of God. The Incarnation is the Christian belief that the Son of God, the Second Person of the Divine Trinity, took the form of a human being in Jesus of Nazareth.<sup>97</sup> In his address, Romero capitalizes on an ancient teaching that understands the Incarnation itself as an act of surrender on the part of God, since in Jesus the eternal and immutable God takes on historical and mutable humanity, the invulnerable creator God sharing in the vulnerability of created life.<sup>98</sup> Through this act of self-surrender, God joins in solidarity with the plight of humanity. Jesus' many acts of surrender and solidarity in his earthly ministry and paschal mystery were conditioned on this prior surrender and solidarity achieved through God's coming down from heaven and becoming Incarnate in Jesus. In imitating Jesus, then, Christians must imitate the act of surrender and solidarity represented by the Incarnation. According to Romero, this represents a development in our understanding of the Incarnation,

“we now have a better understanding of what the incarnation means, what it means to say that Jesus really took human flesh and made himself one with his brothers and sisters in suffering, in tears and laments, in surrender. I am not speaking of a universal incarnation. This is impossible. I am speaking of an incarnation that is preferential and partial: incarnation in the world of the poor.”<sup>99</sup>

In his study of the poetic imagination, Malcolm Guite demonstrates the incarnational character of poetry which is reminiscent of Romero. According to Guite, the expression of the faith through the imagination is an embodying act. Guite takes his bearings from a line in Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, in which Theseus and Hippolyta have a dialogue about truth and the imagination. At one point, Theseus describes how poetic imagination works:

The poet's eye, in fine frenzy rolling,

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<sup>97</sup>This belief is expressed in the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed as follows, “I believe in one Lord Jesus Christ, the Only Begotten Son of God, born of the Father before all ages. God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten, not made, consubstantial with the Father; through him all things were made. For us men and for our salvation he came down from heaven, and by the Holy Spirit was incarnate of the Virgin Mary, and became man.” United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, “What We Believe,” *United States Conference of Catholic Bishops*, accessed May 7, 2018, <http://www.usccb.org/beliefs-and-teachings/what-we-believe/>.

<sup>98</sup>This teaching may be traced back to Paul's Letter to the Philippians: “Rather, he emptied himself, taking the form of a slave coming in human likeness; and found human in appearance, he humbled himself, becoming obedient to death, even death on a cross.” Phil 2:7-8.

<sup>99</sup>Romero, “Political Dimension,” 184.

Doth glance from heaven to earth, from earth to heaven;  
And as imagination bodies forth  
The forms of things unknown, the poet's pen  
Turns them to shapes and gives to airy nothing  
A local habitation and a name.<sup>100</sup>

Guite explains that seeing reality beyond the simple act of observation, the poet employs their imagination to see the many levels of meaning with which reality is pregnant.<sup>101</sup> The poet expresses this meaning by re-presenting reality so that it “bodies forth” the invisible. In other words, the poet expresses the infinite in the finite, the eternal in the temporal, and the invisible in the visible. In this way, the poet engages in a process of incarnation analogous to that of the Son of God in Jesus.

In the context of social justice, imagination can “body forth” hitherto unseen visions of social structures and relationships. Ronald Massanari argued in the 1970s that an imaginative consciousness has great liberative potential. Like Guite, Massanari understands the imagination as rooted in the concrete and open to the “multi-dimensionality of experience.”<sup>102</sup> The imagination then “lives by envisioning other possibilities,” allowing it to break free of any “mono-vision” imposed on reality. In this way, he believes that theologies that employ imagination, like the theologies of play, are “pregnant theologies of liberation,” since “embodying, or maybe better, being grasped by this style would liberate the dominant class from its self-imposed oppression and consequently would free other classes of society from the oppression of this class and its ‘myth.’”<sup>103</sup>

The embodying and multi-dimensional character of imagination is evident in the reading of the kindling prayer from the *Carmina Gadelica*. The many dimensions of the Christian environment— God, angels, saints, people of all classes, and creatures of all degrees—converge in the single act of making a fire. In such imaginative readings of Celtic material, the Celtic Christian spirituality movement highlights the imagination and its role in interconnectivity with the natural world, thereby bringing to the discussion of environmental justice an important theological and psychological precondition for social action. Using Coleridge’s famous analogy

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<sup>100</sup>Guite, *Faith, Hope and Poetry*, 58.

<sup>101</sup>*Ibid.*, 59.

<sup>102</sup>Ronald L. Massanari, “Politics of Imagination: Playful Theologies as Theologies of Liberation,” *Cross Currents* 27 (1977): 203.

<sup>103</sup>Massanari, “Politics of Imagination,” 204.



of the horned fly, which leaves room in its involucre for its antennae yet to come, Malcolm Guite tells us that “the poetic imagination can hold open for us a shape or a space we have yet to grow into.”<sup>104</sup> In order to bring forth a vision as rich and as multi-dimensional as Francis’, there is need for a spirituality that can shape a suitable imagination, one that does not limit our hopes and aspirations for our environment to the dominant vision of our day. The spirituality of the “Celtic” Christian movement is an active and interconnective one, where creation is a dance, in which all of its members, with all of their manifold purposes, move as a whole to the music of God’s love. Allowing oneself to become incarnate in the dance of creation is the precondition of an integral ecology witnessed to by this contemporary spiritual movement in its imaginative grasp of God’s creation.

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<sup>104</sup>Malcolm Guite, *Mariner: A Voyage with Samuel Taylor Coleridge* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 2017), 7.