



# Celtic spirituality and contemporary environmental issues

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Celtic spirituality has a long and distinguished ancestry with its origins in pre-Christian times. It was inculturated among peoples in the far west of Europe, particularly in Ireland, Scotland and the north and south-west of England. It was different from Roman Christianity in distinct ways until the mid-7th century CE when Roman Christianity became the norm in Britain and Ireland. This spirituality has endured throughout the centuries and has experienced a revival from the latter half of the 20th century. From its inception, it has been closely linked to the environment. Over the years many key aspects of Celtic spirituality have been integrated in many religious traditions and shows similarities with and can contribute to a new ethical perspective on environmental issues. This article investigates the current environmental crisis from a faith perspective and attempts to draw lessons from Celtic traditions of spirituality in a scientific age.

## Introduction

I have dealt with the historical and spiritual aspects of Celtic spirituality elsewhere (Duncan in press) and have demonstrated its intimate relationship with the environment in its totality. It has experienced various revivals during the history of Christianity with two contemporary expressions in New Age spirituality and Celtic Christian spirituality. Therefore it has demonstrated its resilience and durability. In this article, environment will be considered in broad perspective as that which relates to all of created life globally where environmental issues abound and require urgent attention and action. These are often attributed to 'outward' manifestations of threat, but are also susceptible to 'inward' dissonance (Müller-Fahrenholz 1995:xi), that is, they reveal 'inward' spiritual problems which demonstrate mutuality with their 'outward' global manifestations, although the distinction between 'outward' and 'inward' has been largely abrogated. The problem is so serious and critical that a multi-faceted approach will be necessary to alleviate it. Part of this response will involve the realm of spirituality, although this in itself poses a potential danger, as many look to a spiritualised solution in another world (colloquially described as 'pie in the sky when you die', cf. Conradie 2000:394), which might lead to the conclusion that any action is irrelevant and therefore unnecessary (cf. Horrell 2010:138) to avoid dealing with the reality of the current crisis. No solution can succeed unless its works responsibly and co-operatively with all who have a concern for the future of humanity as integral to a unified creation in the here and now. This is not a looming crisis; it is upon us and has been for some time. Hessel and Reuther (2000:xxxiii) postulated that 'a combination of overshoot and collapse and a wise change of course, mixing the clashing realities of deep suffering and hopeful living' will occur in the mid-21st century. Thus, any resolution to the crisis (the interface between opportunity and disaster) where 'the future is in balance and where events can go either way' (Bosch [1991] 2011:3) is to be viewed as part of the relationship between creation and salvation (eschatology, cf. Conradie 2012:6) which can only occur within the realm of creation (Conradie 2012:6):

God created the world, we messed it up. God made a plan in response and the story of God's work is not completed as yet. ... The knowledge of creation does not come before the knowledge of salvation, nor does salvation necessarily have an epistemic priority over creation. (Conradie 2012:15)

This relates to Conradie's rhetorical question (2012:18): 'Can we humans save the planet if we cannot destroy it – even though we now have the capacity to destroy almost all life on earth?'

One problematic issue in facing the reality of the crisis is that often we no longer have any direct contact with the environment that sustains us and this has led to a devaluation of its function as an integral part of our lives. We live in cities and do not want to inhabit any other environment where we are deprived of our home comforts and technological stimuli. We are lost when these technological aids do not function optimally. We eat washed pre-packed food, unaware of its origins and growth processes. Our schoolchildren can no longer identify vegetables and fruits. We

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nowadays consign our deceased to undertakers to sanitise and dispose of a normal part of life instead of caring for them ourselves. We ridicule organic farmers, complain about the price of their produce and eagerly follow the mantras of genetically modified foods as a solution to global food shortages. We do not want to get too close to the authentic source of life and its means of sustenance, the earth. The nexus of interdependence has disappeared from our lives. We hoard food at the first rumour of shortage and continue to do so once the threat is past, such is our existential anxiety, linked to 'accumulating material possessions, with fruitless crusades and with frantic pleasure seeking' (Conradie 2000:407). The beginning point for a rectification of the situation for Nürnberger (2011:9) 'is a dynamically evolving vision of the comprehensive well-being of individuals and communities within the comprehensive well-being of the entire social and natural environments' (emphasis in original) which was a natural part of the lifestyles of our forebears in antiquity. Clarke (2002: 1–2, following Leakey 1977) suggests that a more primal human instinct than the killer instinct was cooperation.

## The problem

Ten Global Risks of Highest Concern in 2014:

### Global Risk

1. Fiscal crises in key economies
2. Structurally high unemployment/underemployment
3. Water crises
4. Severe income disparity
5. Failure of climate change mitigation and adaptation
6. Greater incidence of extreme weather events (e.g. floods, storms, fires)
7. Global governance failure
8. Food crises
9. Failure of a major financial mechanism/institution
10. Profound political and social instability. ...

The WEF *Global Risks 2014* report highlights how global risks are not only interconnected, but also have systemic impacts. To manage global risks effectively and build resilience to their impacts, better efforts are needed to understand, measure and foresee the evolution of interdependencies between risks, supplementing traditional risk-management tools with new concepts designed for uncertain environments. If global risks are not effectively addressed, their social, economic and political fallout could be far-reaching, as exemplified by the continuing impacts of the financial crisis of 2007–2008. (World Economic Forum [WEF] 2014:9)

With regard to the African situation, Clarke (2002) claims:

There is an enormous amount of corporate selfishness and unmitigated greed in the world, and Africa is so easy to plunder. Global corporations are heavily influencing global bureaucrats into overriding local and regional interests. The World Bank, the IMF and the WTO are being persuaded to allow transnationals greater access to Africa's resource. Global corporations may claim to want to close the gap between rich and poor, but in Africa wealth has an historical tendency to trickle up, not down. (p. v)

Apartheid aggravated the situation by isolating people from the resources they need to build a sustainable future.

In addition, at the heart of this problem, Nürnberger (2011:11) discerns the need for '[a]n appropriate system of meaning, based on the vision of comprehensive well-being, [a]s essential for healthy survival'. Johnson (2014:xiii) refers to this as the result of being 'complex creatures'. This is not restricted to human beings, for we cannot survive without multiple complex ecosystems working *in tandem* (Müller-Fahrenholz 1995:20).

The spiritual issue raised above is amply described by White, as long ago as 1967 (White 1967:1204–1207), who argued that Christians' disregard for the environment is responsible for many of our current problems due to its thoroughly anthropocentric identity. White's work was predated by that of Carson and Sittler from the 1940s and 1950s (Bakken 2000:2). However, White's claims may not be taken as normative as they have been challenged by Conradie and others (Conradie 2004:126). Following this, Bradley (1990:3) notes three dimensions of the matter. Firstly, he asserts that a distortion of the main message of the Christian faith has led to the idea that nature exists to meet human needs and desires, leading to human exploitation and domination, rather than cooperation. Secondly, the concept of the image of God was developed in such a way as to distance God from his creation and emphasise the Deity's transcendence. Thirdly, dualistic notions of nature led to a denial of the physicality of creation (e.g. as in the incarnation):

... the idea of a radical separation between human beings and the world of nature was totally foreign to Hebrew thought, but it is deeply embedded in ancient Greek philosophy. (Bradley 1990:31; cf. 6–9)

This has led to a distortion of the main message of the Christian faith and to the idea that nature exists to meet human needs and desires, leading to human exploitation and domination, rather than cooperation. In view of the incarnational perspective, humans are called upon to suffer (as Christ did) along with their other partners in creation. This was central to the ascetical thinking of the Celts.

## The Christian faith of the Celts

The distinctive characteristics of Celtic spirituality have been summarised (Duncan 2015) as:

- Love of God's creation and care for the environment.
- Closeness between natural and supernatural (immanence/transcendence).
- Hospitality: love and respect for others.
- Desire to become Christ-like – simple life of prayer, peace and love in tune with the natural world.
- High regard for women and children, especially orphans.
- Love of higher learning, especially in monastic communities.
- Knowledge of scripture, especially the psalms and gospels, with their intimate sense of God's presence.
- Trinitarian theology in creation, redemption and pervading all life with the divine presence.

- Closeness to God through pilgrimage to remote locations.
- Inculturation in hostile contexts.
- Prayer related to normal living (St. Leonard's 2014).

Such life was simple and harsh; yet it was, in continuity with its orthodox roots, also holistic and cosmic (Bradley 1990:8). In many ways, these are not specifically different from other spiritualities, but they do represent a brand of spirituality that originated in antiquity and has endured. Its perdurance makes it relevant to the contemporary need for a tried and tested form of spirituality particularly in a time of impending crisis.

However, Meek (2000:2) strongly cautions against a wholesale adoption of an inadequate reconstruction of the role of 'Celtic Christianity' for this is 'a difficult field, in which imagination may all too easily outstrip reality'. And the reality is that we inhabit a vastly different universe compared with that of the early Celts. He further cautions against identifying 'a post-1800 "view" ... with the historical record of "Christianity in the Celtic areas of the British Isles"' in favour of 'a spiritual Shangri La somewhere back in the mists of time which is overflowing with wisdom for our postmodern age' (Meek 2000:4).

Perhaps he is being too harsh in his assessment that

a major epistemological gulf separates the one from the other; the [latter] is based on an experiential, subjective approach to knowledge; the [former] is controlled by a rationalistic perspective which seeks to elucidate the sources in their own terms. (Meek 2000:235)

Meek is correct in that 'Celtic Christianity is susceptible to syncretism, as it engages with current issues including environmental concerns and ecumenism. Despite this he affirms its incarnational essence which involves our 'understanding the earthly – not to say, earthy – frames written within which "spirituality" is placed' (Meek 2000:233).

## The problem developed

Many writers (Hallman 2000:1; Johnson 2014:xiv, 5, 241–253; Karam 2014:11, 15; Küng 2010:67, 120; Moltmann 1995a:x; Müller-Fahrenholz 1995:xi; Nürnberger 2011:276; Nyomi 2014:6; Vrame 2014:94; WARC 2006:*Accra Confession* §7, 8, 9) have stated the problem in a variety of forms. Nürnberger (2011) articulates them under three headings interacting in life-sustaining ecosystems: impending ecological, economic and spiritual catastrophe:

Ecologically speaking, the infrastructure of life on earth is in danger of collapsing under the weight of human extraction, production, consumption and waste. Climate change, depletion of scarce resources, destruction of plant and animal life, pollution of water and air, soil erosion, declining food security in many parts of the world – these are symptoms of a deadly trend that must be reversed if humanity (and much of life in general) is to have a future. Economically speaking, the current system is leading to widening gaps in productive capacity and life chances between economic centres and peripheries. Growing sections of the world population are marginalised or pushed out of the formal

economy altogether. Productive capacity and scarce resources are invested in the luxury consumption of elites rather than the needs of the majority. Rising debt levels haunt individuals and states. Spiritually speaking, these developments have led to a concentration of human goals on material wants; the artificial creation of a culture of discontent; a narcissistic mindset of wider horizons and long-term visions; the dismantling of traditional systems of meaning, cultural values and social norms without providing valid alternatives and the concomitant dissolution of extended families and communities. (p. 12)

Müller-Fahrenholz (1995:77) refers to the process of 'numbing' expressed in the trio of cynicism, fundamentalism and violentism as 'an expression of profound despair, because it seems as if the world is turning back to chaos'. On a more positive note, John 10:10 speaks of 'theology [a]s life giving and speaks to the deep issues of the contemporary person in a manner that is accessible and comprehensible' (Vrame 2014:94); it is an existential threat. There are more concerns than the physical environmental - 'the deep issues of faith – prayer, ascetic disciplines, justice, security and hope in a time of uncertainty and fear, peace and violence' (Vrame 2014:94). Nürnberger (2011:13) summarises the source of this matter succinctly: 'Divine authority has morphed into human autonomy'.

The household of God (WARC 2006:*Accra Confession* §28), God's hearth and domain, the place where charity as mutual care begins, has become a groaning creation (Rm 8:22, cited in *Accra Confession* §28), and all of this is attributed to the rise and persistence of modernity, in the face of which humanity has adopted a licentious approach to living – without consciousness, conscience, responsibility, rather than living creatively and redemptively. Power and greed have displaced vision and responsibility. Pre-modern views held humans accountable for their mastery over nature in a relationship of trust (Gn 1:28ff.). Here, God's charge to humanity is to establish a living relationship with living creatures. 'Replenish and subdue' (cultivate) (*American Standard Version*) indicate a long-term value in the land if due care is exercised responsibly ('dominion' is responsibility not domination). Conradie (2000:3) attributes this to failing to see the integral relationship between humanity and nature. In this he draws on Berry (1988:14): 'The human is less a being on earth or in the universe than a dimension of the earth and indeed the universe itself'. Damage to the environment is inevitable but it can be limited and redressed. Modernity enabled humans to analyse nature, and use and discard its components according to current human needs and desires. God's authority was displaced by human autonomy. Human sovereignty has come at a great cost as 'responsibility for the greater whole – including the body, community, society and nature – has made way for individual desire and collective self-interest' (Nürnberger 2011:37). He frustratingly exclaims:

How can one generation have the cheek of saddling thousands of future generations with the effect of toxic nuclear waste! How will this generation ever be able to give account for upsetting weather patterns and sea levels through global warming, causing untold misery for future generations! (Nürnberger 2011:45)





And while scientific developments have enhanced human life immeasurably, without adequate checks on responsible use for the good of the community, only disaster and chaos can ensue. Nuclear power development without appropriate nuclear waste disposal offers but one example of a positive scientific development being abused. But the science of neo-liberal economics 'in association with right-wing evangelicalism' (Conradie 2012:9) is also a guilty partner as it 'legitimizes the growth of socio-economic imbalances and ecological destruction that threaten the infrastructure and the future of humankind in particular' (Nürnberger 2011:57). This raises the issue of the connection between ecological degeneration and the inequity of social injustice. Johnson expresses the problem well:

In urban centers economically better-off people can live in green neighbourhoods while poor people are housed near factories, refineries or waste-processing plants [*which depend on their labour*] which heavily pollute the environment. The bitterness of this situation is exacerbated by racial prejudice as environmental racism pressures people of color to dwell in these areas. Feminist analysis clarifies further how the plight of the poor becomes exemplified in poor women whose own biological abilities to give birth are compromised by toxic environments, and whose nurturing of children is hampered at every turn by lack of clean water, food and fuel. The ruination of habitat and the wide-scale perishing of species, with concomitant devastating effects on human beings living in poverty, intertwine in a vicious circle in rural areas alike. (Johnson 2014:6; cf. Johnson 2000:16)

I have quoted Johnson at some length because her analysis is of global relevance. In addition to the population explosion, the depletion of resources provides a serious challenge to the ability to co-operate. Urbanisation, to a degree alleviated the situation through relieving pressure of arable land, a natural birth control effect and creating a treasury of ideas. However, this is countered by population influx (Clarke 2002:8). This situation does not affect the fertility of all life forms negatively. It is the living being who has given and will yet give life that ends up at enormous risk. The source of all life is the Spirit of God who in love and self-sacrifice ('other-regard': Horrell 2010:140) donates life and empowers it to advance; it is 'sacrament of the spirit' (Chryssavgis 2000:91). This has been a specific emphasis in Orthodox liturgy and Celtic spirituality although not restricted to them. Müller-Fahrenholz (1995:xii) describes the essence and role of the God's Spirit as 'the core-energy of creation itself ... the true image of creative, unremitting love ... the power-in-between-all-things ...' which enables us 'to connect the cosmic and the personal and the social'.

To return to the problem, our resources are being depleted as a faster rate than they are being replenished and these resources are unique, vulnerable and finite. Nash (1991) agrees:

If sustainability implies living within the bounds of the regenerative capacities of the earth, with a sense of responsibility for future generations, then present practice is characterised predominantly by *unsustainability* in the use of both non-renewable and renewable resources. (p. 41)

Van Wyngard (2014:1; cf. Johnson 2014:256–259) supports this view: '[W]e will not be able to adequately respond to ecological problems if we cannot address the socioeconomic concerns in the world and in South Africa in particular.' On the other hand, from a faith-based perspective, the contribution of Christianity is of inestimable value because 'the Source and Destiny of reality, sacrifices endlessly and abundantly so that we can live' (Nürnberger 2011:109) and we are invited to participate in this *missio Dei* in an ethical and kenotic way. However, a faith-based perspective is no guarantee of coherence for all humans. Yet, an 'objective ontology of subjectivity' (Nürnberger 2011:138) allows people to live subjectively in a world of demons, angels, saints, witches, ancestral spirits as authentic agents of reality (as did the Celts in the post-early church period). And as this was their 'real' world, so as new developments in scientific theory occur, peoples' sense of reality adapts as does their capacity for repentance of our deep moral failure.

But, apart from this, all life has an inherent drive towards survival and well-being; this depends on the health of the natural and social environment for which it is co-responsible. Nürnberger (2011:186) reminds us that our 'inward' devotion (our ability to relate in personal terms) is a derivative of our awareness of our origin and dependence, our thankfulness and humility. It also has a natural component because 'nature is a power of life for bodily and spiritual well-being' (Küng 2010:23).

What is missing is an integrating link which brings a spiritual aspect to the problem context. Justice brings equity in society as can be seen from the Old Testament year of jubilee, leading to a resolution of the accumulated injustices of the preceding 50 years. This is a process 'to sort out what belongs to whom, and to return it to them' (Brueggemann 1986:5). This is related to the awareness which has grown of the connection between environmental degradation and social, economic and political injustice (Abraham 1994:65) and the resultant crisis is experienced in greatest depth by the poor: 'It is integral to their struggle for justice and liberation, and basically it is about preserving the integrity of creation' (Abraham 1994:65). In such a context, Moltmann declares that 'we shall not be able to achieve justice without justice for the natural environment; we shall not be able to achieve justice for nature without social justice' (Moltmann 1979:128) and this implies the development of just relationships and mutual responsibility:

Ecological perspective insists that we are, in the most profound ways, 'not our own'; we belong ... The ecosystem of which we are a part, is a whole; the rocks and waters, atmosphere and soil, plants, minerals, and human beings interact in a dynamic, mutually supportive way that makes all talk of atomistic individualism impossible. Relationship and interdependence, change and transformation, not substance, changelessness and perfection, are the categories within which a theology for our day must function. (McFague 1979:13)

At this point we can envision a society intending to govern by a significant degree of equity where '[j]ustice is ... a road to a

greater humanity and respect for all of creation' (Mattman 2006:96). It is personal, social and environmental; but it begins from an intra-personal spiritual base: 'Live justice in yourself, justice for all, space for everyone. Integrate everything and you will create space for justice in this world' (Mattman 2006:97); it is concerned with establishing hospitable contexts where it does not take a great step of imagination and action to move to a position of denouncing wrongdoing and announcing hope. Clarke tellingly quotes from a letter attributed to Chief Seathl to the US government in 1855:

What is man without the beasts? If all the beasts were gone, men would die from great loneliness of spirit, for whatever happens to the beasts also happens to man. All things are connected. Whatever befalls the earth befalls the sons of the earth. (Clarke 2002:12)

But this is a challenge – 'The presence of an "Other" is fundamental for a sense of responsibility' (Nürnberger 2011:187; [emphasis in original]) (see Küng's global ethic 2010:186–187). If humans are the outcome of coincidental mutations, then there can be no entitlement whatsoever, only grace. In faith, humans maintain their relationship with God through participation in Christ and 'in God's ownership and mastery of nature' (Nürnberger 2011:187). Nature is entrusted to them. They are custodians, trustees and advocates on behalf of nature. They are accountable (Nürnberger 2011:187). Perhaps it would be more personal to say 'we' rather than 'they' in order to remind us of that sense of ownership (cf. Johnson 2014:122–123). But according to Nürnberger (2011), our dependency is far more personal:

The brunt of the burden of our existence is born by plants and animals, but it also includes human effort, investment, suffering, vulnerability and mortality. Within humanity it is the lower classes, the marginalised and the excluded upon whose shoulders a disproportionate share of the sacrifice rests, but also countless previous generations who have suffered, laboured, struggled and died, otherwise we would not exist, as well as future generations that have to pay a heavy price for our extravagance. (p. 189)

Here, the lower classes might easily refer to non-humans too, for the total environment has been denuded due to a lack of mutual trust. The poor are expected to offer labour in the process of production, but are not accorded a level of trust or recompense commensurate with their contribution. Moltmann (1995b:201) has emphasised this point, for the righteousness and justice of God are not only gifts for humanity. 'They also embrace the community shared by human beings *and the earth*' (emphasis in original). Ecological justification is to be found in Leviticus 25:1–7: 'the land must keep sabbaths to the Lord'. Disregard and disobedience led to Israel's forced removal to Babylon (2 Chr 36:19–21) 'whilst the land of Israel ran the full term of its sabbaths'. And then God will restore the earth:

Then the wilderness will become garden land and garden land will be reckoned as common as scrub. Justice will make its home in the wilderness, and righteousness dwell in the grassland; righteousness will yield peace. (Is 32:15–17)

The issue of trust is crucial here. Küng (2010:14) considers trust as basic to the human personality; it is a ground of being fundamental for the functioning of society, especially in contexts where things have gone awry ecologically. We are all familiar with the hoarding situation where goods become scarce and greed rules rationality, even when the threat has passed. Resources are accumulated by those who control resources to the detriment of the poor but trust implies relationship and mutual need. Without it, avarice increases.

Pre-modern humans were accustomed to returning a portion of the earth's produce to the origin and source of destiny through sacrifice, signifying dependency and indebtedness. Trust in God to provide was celebrated and was a joyful event. In biblical terms this destiny is God the protector of the socially weak and vulnerable; here 'God "acts" through immanent reality' (Nürnberger 2011:202) in a situation where symbiosis, synergy and cooperation have evolved historically to generate survival and well-being, and dysfunction within this complex system reverberates throughout the created order. This complements the theory of evolution and gives life a purpose as God transcends divinity to embrace humanity through the miraculous nature of reality. This might be considered the norm because God does not lust after perfection, but transformation and differentiation where the human consciousness develops 'from fertility, water and pasture, to social cohesion, national identity, judicial integrity, political stability, military strength, international peace and economic prosperity, individual integrity and existential authenticity' (Nürnberger 2011:234). Pope Francis articulated a role for all humankind in the occupation of 'protection':

The vocation of being a 'protector', however, is not just something involving us Christians alone; it also has a prior dimension which is simply human, involving everyone. It means protecting all creation, the beauty of the created world ... respecting each of God's creatures and respecting the environment in which we live. It means protecting people, showing loving concern for each and every person, ... It means building sincere friendships in which we protect one another in trust, respect, and goodness. In the end, everything has been entrusted to our protection, and all of us are responsible for it. Be protectors of God's gifts! (Pope Francis 2013)

under the protection of the creator God (Ps 41:2). The end God has in view is unpredictable and radical, clearly demarcated: 'Behold, I make all things new' (Rv 21:5). It is 'new communion with divine life' (Johnson 2014:1124), a promise that is already present as a proleptic eschatology. This involves a spirituality of immersion in the world; not withdrawal from it; otherwise humans adopt a deistic stance towards life.

Whilst contemporary society is immersed in a culture of victimhood and aggression resulting from economic injustice, sexual exploitation, racism, political conflicts, religious proselytism and abuse of human rights, people are calling for the restoration of peace, justice and truth. Consequently, the immediate issues of concern to the churches are reverence

for God's created beings, the conservation of the ecological balance in nature, the prevention of nuclear devastation and the preservation of the integrity of creation. This requires participation in the depths of global problems through the redeeming work of Christ and the agency of the transcendent Holy Spirit as agent of renewal and ever present (Ps 139:7–10). Walter Kasper expresses this presence, in terms of Celtic anguish, as palpable:

Life breaks forth and comes into being; everywhere that new life as it were seethes and bubbles, and even, in the form of hope, everywhere that life is violently devastated, throttled, gagged, and slain; wherever true life exists, there the Spirit of God is at work. (Kasper 1984:202)

Here is God's Spirit, a redemptive dynamic life force characterised by energy: '... wherever this divine wind blows, something new is stirred up' (Johnson 2014:135). One of the symbolic representations of the Spirit is water. The Celtic Christians and Augustine testify to this. Many stories of the Celts refer to water, the sea and sea monsters. Augustine expressed his view of creation:

But Thee, O Lord, I imagined on every part environing, and penetrating it, though in every way infinite: as if it were a sea, everywhere and on every side, through unmeasured space, one only boundless sea, and it contained within some sponge, huge, but bounded; that sponge must needs, in all its parts, be filled with that immeasurable sea: so conceived I Thy creation, itself finite, yet full of Thee, the Infinite ... (Augustine, *Confessions* 1904:vii.7:142)

This is not a fatuous statement but it begs a question for many. Stephen Hawking (1988:174) asked 'what is it that breathes fire into the equations and makes a universe for them to describe?' The very question presupposes that there is an answer. Sittler ([1954] 2000:5) put it somewhat differently in 1954: 'To stand in wonder before what I did not make and whose processes and rhythms I can neither alter nor arrest may be a means of grace, a path of understanding'. This is the outreach of the Spirit (symbolised now as fire rather than water) into the world as God's agent. In this process humans as masters of the cosmos are called by God to draw all creation to God in God's dwelling place on earth. This may indicate a form of reconciliation for there is a sacramental quality about creation as the ordinary things of life (water, bread and wine) are set apart (made holy) and infused with divine grace. These three elements are dependent on the elements of fire and water in both a physical and spiritual sense.

This can offer hope in otherwise hopeless situations such as Africa where for generations now local cultures have been degraded and rejected despite Jesus Christ having come to embrace every culture for the purpose of salvation, where his divine and human natures united to make him 'a genuine human being with the integrity of his own freedom' (Johnson 2014:157). This being so, it must be remembered that death is an integral constituent of the life process, and the Spirit of love abides in solidarity as the promise of future new life in the glory of the suffering crucified God, giving hope.

Johnson (2014:208) talks here of 'deep resurrection' as God's embodiment of the human life in both time and eternity.

We are called to be good stewards or managers of all God's creation. The key effort here is to make the earth a sustainable planet, where humans deal considerately with its resources both in the present and for the future. An important contribution to our quest for survival is derived from the ability to place ourselves in the context and mindset of others; this is empathy. It extends to expressions of fear, expectations and hopes and manifests itself in unselfishness. Therefore, it has a social ethical base.

There is evidence that, because of human inability to be good stewards of the earth and the environment God has given us, we are faced with climate change and dire consequences. 'Eco-theology is therefore very important for our times to reverse this human irresponsibility and to make us more faithful to God' (Nyomi 2014:6). This can be perverted by misinterpretation of the command to 'have dominion' (Gn 1:28) over creation as a license for global exploitation. Humans are certainly integral to creation and salvation; hence, they are more than stewards but priests of creation whose function is to make holy as opposed to consuming the material world. This kind of thinking resonates with the indigenous peoples of many cultures. If we follow the Celtic approach derived from eastern orthodoxy, that 'an awareness of God's presence in and to all creatures [*this*] has a profound effect on all our dealings with other creatures' (Theokritov 2014:670). Asceticism provides a valid means of fulfilment of our mission. Theokritov (2014:671) quotes Chrysostom in support as a means of learning "'to give and not simply to give up"; to share, to connect with the natural world and the neighbour'. It is important to question what God is '... calling people of faith to do that transforms these desperate situations into life giving situations that offer hope' (Nyomi 2014:6). This is the essence of Celtic spirituality in any and every age.

## A solution?

In an age dominated by war and militarism, increasing global poverty, social injustice, and environmental deterioration, we will learn ... that no nation which relies primarily on military strength for its security will endure long nor will it leave to coming civilisations a heritage much worth preserving. ... and that to ignore the intimate implications of the social, biological, and physical systems that constitute our environment, and the delicate balance that prevails between them to make this a habitable planet, is to court disaster for life on earth. (Woods 1985:249)

As Celts had to deal with terrorist incursions, so in the 20th century this presents an ever present challenge as a professional international network of terrorism operates. Though it may appear too simplistic an approach, the Celtic way is the path of patient, resolute, non-violent action, by refusing to render evil in the face of evil. At the same time, Columba of Iona remained unafraid to speak truth to power (Forbes 1919:326) by challenging the king's unjust behaviour





on more than one occasion. Columba chose to become the conscience of the one in authority as both he and the secular ruler derived their authority from God. This was also a matter of maintaining political stability, which, according to Bede (2008:118–121) was closely linked to environmental sustainability. There has never been a time when this role needs to be fulfilled to protect the future, but now it is not just the responsibility of autocratic rulers, although part of the solution is the development of a critical mass amongst those in power in a wide variety of organisations and institutions, particularly politicians and churches (Nürnbergger 2011:46). Liberal capitalism has 'eventually found itself stranded on the murkier shores of globalisation, together with hypocritical and morally corrupt political regimes, serious global economic disparities, global warming and debilitating effects on the environment, and armed civil conflicts, all of which take place with transnational acts of terrorism (Karam 2014:11). Culpability is assigned not only to the United Nations (UN) and bilateral partners. Faith-based organisations share in 'responsibility – and culpability – in global decision-making and the impact of human development' (Karam 2014:12).

Meylahn (2014:8) talks of 'the fragility of the *oikos*' and reminds us that the responsibility does not belong to leaders alone but to the entire community of beneficiaries of creation:

[T]oday humans are the greatest ecological and geological force determining the earth. ... Realising that the world is about liveability and sustainability and that this is not something that is out there to be found, but something waiting to be created and sustained. The responsibility of the liveability and sustainability of this world cannot be shifted to nature, economics, or some or other transcendent truth, or even God. It is a human responsibility to create a world that will be sustainable for generations to come. The gift of the child is to pray a world into existence in hope and faith. (Meylahn 2014:7)

Such a responsible society is a challenge to neo-liberalism, aware of its dependency on the natural world, and can contribute to the development of an equitable and sustainable world. It works towards the preservation of the resource base of the earth, a modest, healthy livelihood for all, equity in the distribution of resources and a concern for the weak and vulnerable. Such are ecodominical (building the household of life, from *oikodomeo*) communities which 'cannot be at peace with the violent powers that threaten to throw the world into chaos; rather, they must seek to correct and transform a world in crisis' (Müller-Fahrenholz 1995:110).

For this to occur there needs to be a balance of material and non-material need satisfaction (Nürnbergger 2011:66) bound up with humility, gratitude and compassion (Johnson 2014:xiv): 'Once one understands that the evolving community of life in Earth is God's beloved creation and its ruination an unspeakable sin, then deep affection shown in action on behalf of ecojustice becomes an indivisible part of one's life'. From a theological point of view, Johnson (2014:xv) begins with the biblical book of Job and counsels 'Ask the beasts and they will teach you' (Job 12:7). Human

superiority is humbled before the splendour and grandeur of creation where even the animal kingdom is aware of its origins and its right to exist and share in creation: 'Otherkind exist to enjoy being in their own right, not only to function as companions or helpers of humankind' (Hessel & Reuther 2000:xxxv). This reflects a more integrated view of creation in which the needs and contributions of other life forms must be taken account of. This is bolstered by an 'ecological ethic of love for earth's community of life' (Johnson 2014:xvi); note again the resonance with a Celtic spirituality. By becoming more conscious of our dependence on other life forms in our and their relationship to God, humans can:

find their own identity reimagined as vital members of the community of creation rather than as a species divorced from the rest, and step up to protect Earth's creatures as neighbours whom they love. ... to discover that love of the natural world is an intrinsic part of faith in God, to practical and critical effect. (Johnson 2014:xvii–xviii)

The Celtic devotion in using the Psalms offers us a glimpse of our dependence on an ultimate concern: 'These all look to you to give them their food in due season' (Psalm 104:27). Müller-Fahrenholz (1995:27) expresses this with virtual Celtic simplicity:

God-*ruah* enlivens, ensouls and wholly governs everything. Accordingly, all things live by the original blessing of that abundant fertility which has its times and occasions. Where the *ruah* draws in her breath, apathy and death prevail. Where the *ruah* is absent or concealed, we feel that profound fear which always assails us when the ground is taken from under our feet – a sense of terror familiar to people in earthquake zones. But where God-*ruah* issues forth with new strength the face of the earth is renewed. (cf. Horrell 2010:129)

Nürnbergger (2011:72) here favours the approach of 'experiential realism' as a way of dealing with immanent reality represented by tradition. This science cannot do due to its inability to answer ultimate questions.

Küng (2010:37–38, 49–50) promotes a global primal ethic based on the traditional teaching of ancient religions (including Celtic faithfulness) in which the fundamental issue was the protection of society through the respect for life, a culture of solidarity, a culture of tolerance and a culture of equal rights and partnership. The essence of this value system is our essential humanity and need for humane treatment or dignity through service. But what is the purpose of life? It is not to promote humanity, but is the knowledge, glorification and enjoyment of God (Calvin, *Geneva Catechism*, 1547 cited in Küng 1993:188). This can be achieved in human relationships. The core of Küng's social ethic seems to be consistent with Celtic spirituality based in individual, social and institutional responsibility:

For a culture of non-violence and reverence for all life.  
For a culture of solidarity and a just economic order.  
For a culture of tolerance and a life in truthfulness.  
For a culture of equal rights and partnership between men and women. (Küng 2010:187)

This can be expressed through solidarity, sustainability, sufficiency and participation where

[s]olidarity comprehends the full dimension of the earth community and of interhuman obligation. Sustainability gives high visibility to ecological integrity and wise behaviour throughout the resource-use cycle. The third and fourth norms express the requirements of distributive and participatory justice in a world that has reached or is exceeding resource, pollution, and population limits. (Hessel & Reuther 2000:xxxvii)

On a similar trajectory, the World Communion of Reformed Churches (formed in 2010 by the union of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches and the World Evangelical Alliance) has adopted the WARC 2006: *Accra Confession* §41) and its policy of covenanting for justice by being prepared to work together 'with other communions, the ecumenical community, the community of other faiths, civil movements and peoples' movements for a just economy and the integrity of creation'. This could provide an excellent opportunity for the broadest 'political' approach to beginning to find a global way forward to save the world:

The systemic nature of our most significant risks calls for procedures and institutions that are globally coordinated yet locally flexible. As international systems of finance, supply chains, health, energy, the Internet and the environment become more complex and interdependent, their level of resilience determines whether they become bulwarks of global stability or amplifiers of cascading shocks. Strengthening resilience requires overcoming collective action challenges through international cooperation among business, government and civil society. (WEF 2014:9)

A sword of Damocles hangs over this entire predicament for humankind and otherkind as we oscillate between the poles of despair and hope (Conradie [2000:382] uses the metaphors of sedative and stimulus), where despair leads to the conclusion that there is nothing we ourselves can do to mitigate the situation often leading to a paralysed inaction. To counter this, a resolute persistence is needed akin to that of those who constantly struggle to survive: 'Hope empowers us to enter into solidarity with the groaning creation and to persist in the struggle for the renewal of all things' (Migliore 1991:247) liberated by an ethical eschatology:

That is why faith, wherever it develops into hope, causes not rest but unrest, not patience but impatience. It does not claim calm the unquiet heart of man. Those who hope in Christ can no longer put up with reality as it is, but begin to suffer under it, to contradict it. (Moltmann 1967:21)

This brings out the best policy for Christians as a resistance force to challenge the standards of this world (Rm 12:1-2) to work towards salvation through transformation (Conradie 2000:386), and this will necessary involve challenging the powers that seek to domineer and destroy. This is the struggle for the commonwealth or kingdom of God. This is a matter of responsibility to God's grace through a prayerful disposition that is contemplative and active divine and other-regard.

## The relevance of Celtic spirituality

Celtic spirituality is holistic and integrated; life is one and is lived under the guidance and protection of God on whom people are totally dependent, that is, the unity of all things in God. Adamnan gives us an insight into the life of Columba in a sense from which we can derive benefit – a life totally in communion (companionship and stewardship) with the natural world that surrounded him (Anderson & Anderson 1961:313-314). Robson (1998) is correct in stating:

What was good and true in Celtic spirituality has never really died. The independent heart of Celtic descendents everywhere still yearn for the solitary place, still rejoice in the goodness of creation still see the Lord beside them as they walk, still see him in the face of friend and stranger. (p. 29)

As with Woods (1985:243): 'The Celtic church, which flourished for many centuries, was a vigorous expression of Christian faith and offers us lessons for dealing with today's critical issues'. This is a startling comment. Yet, it has been borne out of centuries as *praxis*:

If the rich history of the Celtic churches is a fairly recent discovery, their spirituality may be an even more surprising resource for a life-affirming, holistic, and faithful way of life for Christians in this postmodern world and more importantly, the world of the future. Celtic spirituality may in fact "newer" and more valuable than many better known spiritual traditions of later ages. (Woods 1985:243)

Wonderment has been industrialised, commercialised and globalised, and yet:

wonder at the world in the face of the wasting of the world: for a growing number of religious persons today, this experience provides a new entry into the ancient forms of contemplation along with a call to fresh ethical acts of prophetic witness and repair of the world. (Johnson 2000:4)

As in the earliest periods of the history of Christianity, 'religious communities are capable of unparalleled **social mobilisation**, not to mention some form of **moral standing**' (Karam 2014:8; [emphasis in original]). As the work of the Holy Spirit is crucial in the formation of Christian communities (Conradie 2012:27), this challenges individualism by 'stressing the category of community' (Bradley 1990:5)

We need to abandon our ideas of our special status in favour of our ecological vocation within the paradigm of social ecology, of the community of creation manifested in domination rather than dominion (Boff 1995:26) – solidarity through parenting, teaching, curriculum design, businesses adopting environmental best practice, farmers using organic fertilisers, investors using renewable energy, building owners using energy conservation, recycling materials, protecting natural habitats.

Although it is viewed as outmoded, adopting an ascetic lifestyle (like the Celtic Christians) can aid global protection:



The true purpose of asceticism has always been to make persons more fully alive to the movement of grace in their lives. It does so by sacrificial acts that remove what blocks sensitivity to the presence of the Spirit. ... In light of ecological destruction ... asceticism practiced with an eye for the good of other species acts with discipline precisely to protect physical life. A sensuous earth-affirming asceticism leads people to live more simply not to make themselves suffer and not because they are anti-body, but to free themselves from enslavement from market practices that harm other living creatures. (Johnson 2014:283)

An ascetic lifestyle common to both Greek Orthodox and Celtic spirituality is an ascetic theology where asceticism is fundamental to the spiritual life due to its

reassurance of our difficult and painful struggle to relate our theology to the world, our justice and our economy to the poor. ... [as] an attitude of attendance to and expectation of the Spirit. ... allowing room for the spirit, for an action beyond our action. (Chryssavgis 2000:92)

The key to this is renunciation through adopting a simple lifestyle in opposition to greed. Humans constantly suffer from scarcity of one kind or another. Scarcity is defined as 'never enough' (to satisfy our greed, that is, the lack of energy in South Africa through not harnessing the natural energy which we have in abundance); its opposite is 'wholeheartedness' (enough for everyone in hospitality) (Brown 2014:11). These definitions speak to our current crisis with a focus on scarcity (a focus of the individual) rather than wholeheartedness (a focus of the community) which could result from lack of discrimination in the use of earth's resources). McFague (2000:36) challenges Christians to adopt 'a different understanding of abundance, one which embraces the contradiction of the cross: giving up one's life to find it, limitation and diminishment, sharing and giving – indeed, sacrifice'. Monastic communities could and still can 'register a powerful protest against a wasteful lifestyle devoid of any sense of responsibility to the world of nature' (Abraham 1994:71). This has a sacramental aspect through renewal in the celebration of the sacrament which is linked to daily life (the liturgy after the liturgy). Contemplation can assist in realising our 'cosmic being' in the Eucharist (Abraham 1994:72).

Kishkovsky (2014:838) offers a way forward in this tradition where we value 'daily life as a living vocation' and '[t]he household of faith [oikos] is commanded to see the Lord in every human, and to minister to every human who is in need as if ministering to Christ himself' Kishkovsky (2014:839).

It seems almost superfluous to mention the role of liturgy and especially the scriptures:

to the prophets and psalmists of the old Testament who proclaim God's continuing care for all his creation; to the Gospel writers who portray Jesus as the man who communes with the wild beasts and who stills the storm; to St Paul who writes of the cosmic mission of Christ and who sums up the Christian approach to nature in that wonderful passage in his epistle to the Romans [8:18–39] in which he portrays the whole created order groaning and in travail for its deliverance and liberation. (Bradley 1990:7)

This is the tradition of the early church fathers of the orthodox tradition and the Celtic saints.

Related to other spiritualities, but particularly relevant to that of Celtic Christianity, are the values proposed by Hallman (2000:2): 'gratitude, humility, sufficiency, justice, peace, love faith and hope' to which may be added solidarity, empowerment, participation, sustainability and sufficiency. These have to be juxtaposed with the standards of contemporary society in an attempt to develop a vision of *shalom* as the completeness of creation with, that is, the use of enabling power as an alternative to dominating power. Rasmussen (1994:125) indicates that 'nothing happens apart from power. Nothing can', in a context where 'God is a power-sharing God' for 'God is power (Rasmussen 1994:124). This context has to be viewed as part of our cultural expression within the created order marked by 'grace notes' defined by Sittler (Bakken 2000:16), environmental indicators which point in the direction of the kingdom of God. They are 'manifestations of grace, as gifts pointing beyond themselves to their source in the ultimate and all-encompassing reality of the free, faithful, and self-giving love of God' (Bakken 2000:18), subjects of appreciation and enjoyment and encourage us to be motivated, attentive and architects of our future. This is exemplified in Psalm 104, which reveals 'a matrix of grace in which all things derive significance from their origin, and all things find fulfilment in praise' (Sittler [1954] 2000:28). The physical world of the materialist God is a place where God never pursues the question of human salvation, but rather 'restoration ... presented in terms of men's material involvement in the world of nature' (Sittler [1954] 2000:29). This is the link with social justice, unity, reconciliation which is a manifestation of Horrell's 'other-regard' (2010:140) as 'the means to achieve and sustain the unity and solidarity of the community'.

In many ways, the distinctive features of Celtic Christianity are evident in other forms of spirituality. However, this does not undermine its value. Celtic Christianity has a record of many centuries of contributing to an environmentally friendly lifestyle that is grounded in solidarity, sufficiency, sustainability and participation. These are not only values which the Christian community can adhere to and promote. Celtic spirituality provides a reference point from which the global Christian community can reassess its relationship with the total environment on which we all mutually depend. This is a process by which we can affirm the goodness and wonder of God's creation, its integrity and its value. It embraces the totality of life individually and socially – it is physical, spiritual, intellectual and psychological – it is the manifestation of God with us.

## Conclusion

While it is not contested that the world is in crisis, many would not view the spiritual realm as part of the problem. Hopefully this view has been dispelled in this article. A clear and unequivocal resolution of the global crisis is likely to elude humanity until we actually have to experience

and contend with the awfulness of our lack of care and nurture of the environment. Whether or not it will be in time to avert total chaos, bringing us back to a time prior to creation is questionable. In any case, it will be the result of greater cooperation, commitment and accountability than the world has ever known, if the threat is to be minimised. What is required to solve the spiritual *malaise* is a return to some form of non-romanticised spirituality such as that found in early Celtic spirituality that may help form a new mindset, attitudinal change and commitment to action, that is, *praxis*, as a basis to recreate the circumstances where Jesus might yet be able to exclaim that; 'I have come that they may have life, and may have it in all its fullness' (John 10:10).

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