The Relationship between Adomnán of Iona's *Life of St Columba* and Celtic Christianity/Spirituality

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ABSTRACT

The *Life of St Columba* offers an account of events in the life of the sixth century saint who founded an influential monastic community with strong connections to the peoples of Ireland and Scotland. The text's relationship to the categories of 'Celtic Christianity' and 'Celtic spirituality' is critically examined. It is deemed justifiable to locate the *Life* within these categories because it manifests features of other religious texts produced by Celtic peoples in the early Middle Ages. Whether it can be legitimately accommodated within popular versions of Celtic spirituality/Christianity depends on whether the assessment is conducted from academic or spiritual practice perspectives.

KEYWORDS

Celtic Christianity; Celtic spirituality; Iona; St Columba

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Introduction

The *Life of St Columba* was written by Adomnán, the ninth abbot of the monastic community founded by St Columba (circa 521-597) on the island of Iona off the west coast of Scotland. The exact date of composition is unclear but it seems to have been written no earlier than 696 (Sharpe, 1995, 55). In this work, Adomnán sought to record selected events of Columba's life, to commemorate him and to convey an understanding of who he was and the status of the community on Iona. An agenda of familial piety and respect may also have motivated Adomnán who, like nearly all the abbots of Iona in the seventh century, was a blood relation of Columba (Bradley, 1999, 18-19).

As Ian Bradley (1996) relates in his analysis of the saint, Columba (or Colum Cille in Old Irish) was born in what is now County Donegal in north west Ireland and was of noble birth. He is said to have established monastic foundations in Ireland before journeying to Iona, which lay within the Irish colony of Dál Riata. He was based there for the rest of his life, although he travelled within Dál Riata and back to Ireland. Within the *Life*, there are reports of Columba travelling into the territory of the Picts in eastern Scotland but the conversion of the Picts to Christianity is more likely to have been undertaken later by monks from Iona. The influence of that community extended further when, in the seventh century, St Aidan took charge of the task of converting the peoples of Northumbria, establishing his base on the island of Lindisfarne. The founder of the influential monastic community on Iona, with strong connections to the peoples of Ireland and Scotland, might reasonably be expected to be accorded a prominent place within what has become known as 'Celtic Christianity' or, more generally, 'Celtic spirituality'. Moreover, Adomnán's *Life of St Columba* might be expected to have acquired privileged status within these domains as it is the earliest account of the saint available in complete form. This article critically examines the relationship between the text and Celtic Christianity and spirituality. First, though, it is worth turning briefly to the nature and content of the text.

Nature and Content of the *Life of St Columba*

The *Life* is an early example of Celtic hagiography which, as a genre, combined the asceticism of the lives of the Desert Fathers and others and the wonder-working found in tales of figures in Celtic mythology (Stancliffe, 1992). The *Life of St Columba* owes much to the *Life of St Antony* by Athanasius and the *Life of St Martin of Tours* by Sulpicius Severus, written in the mid-fourth and early fifth centuries respectively. Adomnán may also have drawn upon stories about Columba that were collected by Ségéne, the fifth abbot of Iona, and recorded as the *Book of the Miracles of Columba* by Ségéne's nephew, Cumméne (only a fragment of this survives) (Herbert, 1988). The wonder-working and magic in Celtic hagiographies served to stress the saints' access to power and thus to confer special status on the institutions with which they were most closely associated (Bradley, 1999, 8). In the case of the *Life*, the text can be seen as reinforcing the primacy of the monastery at Iona among the growing number of Columban foundations.

The text is divided into three books, with each having an explicit focus as framed by the author. The first is concerned with "prophetic revelations", the second with "miracles of power" and the third with "visions of angels". As is evident from this and in common with the *Lives* of other Irish saints, Adomnán's concern is with constructing Columba as a figure of religious note and power. Examples of incidents that orient towards this function are the appearance of a column of light above Columba's head while celebrating Mass (Book III, Chapter 17) and the appearance of a pillar of fire at his death (III 23), possibly based on the Exodus theophany in fire but also perhaps echoing the heroic light that, in Irish mythology, was said to rise from Cú Chulainn's head during battle (Low, 1996, 161). The power held by Columba is represented as capable of overcoming rival powers, as when he is portrayed as performing wonders that overcome the magic of the wizards of the Pictish king, Bridei (II, 34). This power is constructed as enduring after Columba's death through the inclusion of accounts of posthumous miracles (II 44-45).

Repeatedly in the text there are echoes of gospel accounts of Jesus's qualities and of miracles associated with him, especially in Book II where one obvious resonance occurs in Chapter 1. There a story is related in which, when Columba was a young deacon studying in Ireland, no wine was available for Mass and so Columba drew water from a well, "called on the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, who at Cana in Galilee changed water into wine, and in

faith he blessed the water that he drew from the well. With Christ's help, here once again the lowly nature of water was transformed at the saint's gesture into the more desired form of wine...And so Christ the Lord made this the first proof of power in his disciple" (154). This imitation of the first miracle attributed to Jesus in gospel accounts is found in stories of other Irish saints too (Reeves, 1857, 104).

Features such as these can seem strange and alien to contemporary readers even within Christian contexts and can position the text as lacking capacity to speak to current concerns in useful ways. It shares this potential problem with other spiritual works from earlier historical eras. Yet the *Life* faces an additional problem in that, unlike St Ignatius of Loyola's *Personal Writings*, for example, it is not consistently concerned primarily with the author's/subject's relationship with God, the discernment of divine will and the fostering of other people's relationships with God, which remain important aims for many readers. There are elements of these within the *Life* and it does include incidents that we might today regard as pastoral care (for example, in Book II, Chapter 41, where Columba is asked to intervene by a man whose wife will not lie with him because of his ugliness) but overall it is oriented more towards the agendas outlined earlier, of crafting a particular version of Columba that satisfied needs at the time.

Celtic Christianity and Celtic Spirituality

Despite this, the *Life* has been deemed eligible for consideration as a spiritual classic within Celtic spirituality. The writer of the introduction to the 'Celtic spirituality' edition within the *Classics of Western Spirituality* series justified not including it as an example of a 'Scottish' entry only on the grounds of its length (Davies, 1999, 60). But what exactly is meant by 'Celtic spirituality' and 'Celtic Christianity'? Answers to this question have arisen from academic research and have been elaborated through popular imagination to produce different but overlapping narratives about the nature, origins and history of 'Celtic spirituality/Celtic Christianity'.

There now exists a substantial and varied literature on 'Celtic Christianity' or more generally 'Celtic spirituality'. Some texts are located within a discourse of academic research (for example, Bradley, 1999; Low, 1996; Mackey, 1995; Márkus, 1997; Meek, 2000; Ó

Duinn, 2000), some are focused on resources for prayer and worship (for example, De Waal, 1996; Newell, 2005; Simpson, 1995) and some resist easy categorization because of the diverse discourses upon which they draw (for example, Bamford and Parker Marsh, 1986; Newell, 1997, 2010). John O'Donohue's influential, best-selling book from 1997, *Anam Cara: Spiritual Wisdom from the Celtic World*, belongs in the last category (as do his subsequent books on similar themes) and is perhaps one of the most notable texts within the current revival of interest in Celtic Christianity and spirituality. This current revival is not without precedent: Ian Bradley (1999) traced five previous revivals, beginning in the eighth and ninth centuries, and contended that all have involved constructing groups of sixth and seventh century Christians as 'paragons of a pure and primitive faith' (ix) in service of diverse agendas. This can be seen in the current revival: although it only gained real momentum in the late 1980s, it can be traced back to the early 1960s when books were published which crafted a version of Celtic Christianity as pure and independent and which made Celtic prayers (drawn from the *Carmina Gadelica* collected and edited by the Scottish folklorist, Alexander Carmichael, in the Western Isles in the 19th century) readily available as personal spiritual resources.

For the purposes of this article, what needs to be taken from the literature is a sense of the specific themes that have characterized both academic and popular engagement with Celtic Christianity and Celtic spirituality. Academic engagement with texts on Christianity of the early Middle Ages, produced in places where people spoke Celtic languages, has suggested that this 'Celtic Christianity' was characterized by a strongly incarnational theme emphasizing physicality and materiality, a strongly Trinitarian theme, themes of penitence/penance and pilgrimage, a theme of nature as autonomous, the role of human creativity and the imagination, an emphasis on localism, non-hierarchicalism and positive and empowering images of women (Bradley, 1996, 17; Davies, 1999, 11-15). Quoting from more popular writers on Celtic Christianity, Gilbert Márkus (1997) has elaborated and added to this list (although he does not subscribe to it), including the claim that the Celts lacked "that indelible sense of our sinfulness and divine wrath that we find in some other Christian traditions" (O'Donoghue, 1993, 38).

The latter features help account for the current popularity of Celtic Christianity and spirituality in that they represent qualities often perceived as absent from institutionalized Church contexts (Bowman, 2002, 87) and more broadly as according with the 'subjective

turn' in the Western world which has seen a (qualified) shift from religion to spirituality (Heelas and Woodhead, 2005, 2-5). Indeed, Bradley (1999, 192) has noted that 'Celtic spirituality' is much more commonly encountered than 'Celtic Christianity' in titles of books and retreats. Some of the themes noted above (the emphasis on physicality, pilgrimage, imagination, place/localism, non-hierarchicalism and the contribution of women) are salient features in contemporary popular versions of Celtic spirituality but the theme of nature tends to be foregrounded and presented in a particular way, with the natural world seen as suffused with divine or more-than-human presence and accordingly celebrated for its sacredness. Depending upon one's perspective, this may be seen as subverting spirit-matter dualism or as risking slippage into pantheism but it does overlap with features of contemporary neo-paganisms and alternative spiritualities (Bowman, 2002, 76; Harvey and Vincett, 2012, 162-164).

Within academic literature, though, there has been heated debate about the nature and legitimacy of the concept of Celtic Christianity as it has been formulated at different times. Some have advanced thorough deconstructions of 'Celtic Christianity' and have refused to accord any legitimacy to it (for example, Meek, 2000) whereas others have sought to move beyond critique and have offered a more pragmatic approach (for example, Bradley, 1999, 2000). This debate springs partly from differences in interpretative traditions across the disciplines represented by different (academic and popular) writers and the agendas they seek to pursue, although the crux of the debate centres on contestation about the extent to which different writers hold themselves accountable to historical detail (Davies, 1999, 8-10).

To take some examples of specific points of contention, there are the questions of whether or not the thematic family resemblances across 'Celtic' Christian texts and contexts of the early Middle Ages are sufficient to justify the identification of a 'tradition' and whether they meaningfully differentiate the 'Celtic' tradition from the nature of religion and spirituality elsewhere in Europe at those times (Davies, 1992). More pertinently – and with particular reference to more popular works on 'Celtic spirituality', 'Celtic Christianity' and the 'Celtic church' – questions have been raised about whether at least some of the features outlined earlier represent a romanticized 'reading into' texts that are said to embody the 'Celtic' tradition in an effort to craft a consoling, ancient, magical 'Other' that stands in contrast to the discourses that framed a modernist world (Davies, 1999, 6-7). Denominational justification has also been proposed as a motivation for the construction of and alignment

with a Celtic Christianity, whether that be an Anglican appeal to a pre-Roman Catholic Christianity as a means of constructing substantial historical roots for Anglicanism or a Presbyterian and Congregationalist appeal to a Celtic non-hierarchicalism to justify rejection of Anglican episcopacy (Bradley, 1999, 127-135; Davies, 1999, 7-8). Furthermore, nationalist agendas have also motivated the construction of Celtic Christianity, most notably in the nineteenth century, and the most recent resurgence of interest in Celtic spirituality can also be seen as according with a contemporary environmentalist appeal to a perceived Celtic concern with nature. Bracketing these critiques for the moment, attention will now be directed towards the extent to which the motifs that were earlier identified as characterizing Celtic Christianity and Celtic spirituality in academic and popular work can be readily discerned within the *Life of St Columba*.

The *Life of St Columba* and Celtic Christianity/Spirituality

The *Life* reflects some of these ‘Celtic’ motifs but not others and it includes motifs that are noticeably absent or underplayed in popular texts on Celtic Christianity and spirituality. As noted above, a strongly incarnational theme emphasizing physicality and materiality is found in Celtic texts of the early Middle Ages (and also in the *Carmina Gadelica*) which carry a sense of the intimate presence of God, Christ and/or the saints accompanying the person in their everyday life. By contrast, the relationship between the individual and God/Christ within the *Life* could be said to be more distant and, to contemporary Western sensitivities, forbidding and fearful (Bradley, 2011). Also, the Trinitarian theme that is said to characterize Celtic Christianity and spirituality is not explicitly oriented to in the *Life*. God and Christ certainly feature and, engaging with the text from a theological perspective, James Bruce (2005) has contended that the Spirit is necessarily present in the accounts of prophecy, miracles and angelic visions. It may be worth noting, though, that an orthodox Christian understanding of the Trinity can be found in the *Altus Prosator*, a poem that is more likely than any other document to have been written by Columba himself (Clancy and Márkus, 1995).

Much more readily discernible are the themes of penitence/penance and pilgrimage. A penitential theme is, of necessity, characteristic of the Irish Penitentials of the sixth to the ninth centuries (Tanner, 2009) but does not often feature in contemporary versions of Celtic

spirituality. Mostly in Book I of the *Life*, stories are told of various individuals who journeyed to see Columba after having engaged in wrongdoing (including murder) and who are given penitential tasks. One example from Book II is found in Chapter 39 where the tale is told of Librán who came from Ireland in repentance for having killed a man and for having then broken an oath to serve a relative who had bought his release from prison. Columba is said to have told him to spend seven years in penance on the island of Tiree before returning to Ireland to make reparation to his relative.

The major theme of pilgrimage that Ian Bradley (1996: 17ff) identified within works of Celtic Christianity is obviously relevant to the *Life*. For early Irish monks, ‘pilgrimage’ had a specific meaning which involved exile from the distractions and comforts of the world in a type of martyrdom in which, out of love for God, monks abandoned home and the indulgence of human desires (for example, though fasting and other penitential exercises) (Stancliffe, 1982). Given that Columba had journeyed from Ireland and settled on Iona (various reasons have been proposed for this with varying degrees of evidence in the *Life* and in the *Annals of Ulster*), pilgrimage forms the background to the *Life*. Explicit invocations of pilgrimage also occur within the text, where Columba is represented as having withdrawn to live on the island of Hinba (which has never been identified with certainty) for a time (III 5, 17-18); various visitors to Columba are described as pilgrims; and, in the account of the end of Columba’s life, Adomnán writes of him “crossing over from this weary pilgrimage to the heavenly home” (III 23).

The theme of nature and the natural world that plays such a major role in contemporary conceptualizations of Celtic Christianity/spirituality can also be readily found in the *Life*. This is hardly surprising given that, in Adomnán’s time, human survival and functioning were dependent on nature and could be easily imperilled. The settings in which nature most commonly appears as a theme are the many instances in which Columba exerts control over the elements in some way, as in Book II, Chapter 34, where he is portrayed as calling upon Christ to dispel storms and darkness that had been invoked by a Pictish wizard upon a loch. This story places Columba within the common motif of weather-working Celtic saints (Low, 1996, 167) but, as with other similar stories in the *Life*, it does not construct nature as autonomous but as capable of being brought under control to diverse ends. These stories again convey Columba’s power and also position him alongside Christ who is

represented as having exerted control over the waters (for example, see the gospel of Mark 4:35-41).

There are some points in the *Life* that could be said to reflect the environment-friendliness and the celebration of the goodness of creation that are frequently found in popular works on Celtic Christianity/spirituality. For example, Columba is sometimes represented as caring for and having a special relationship with animals, most notably when he instructed a brother to care for an exhausted crane which had flown from Ireland (I 48) and when a white workhorse at the monastery laid its head against him and wept as Columba neared death (III 23). However, the crane episode has more usually been read as conveying Columba's concern for his native land (Meek, 2000, 190) and, in Book II, Chapter 26, a tale is related of Columba killing a wild boar on Skye by the power of his word, an episode which may have been inserted by Adomnán to portray Gaelic superiority over the hostile Picts. Overall, there does not seem to be a consistent picture of what might be called a celebratory, environment-friendly orientation in the *Life* or a notion of nature as sacred in the way in which it tends to be constructed in contemporary Celtic spirituality. This is not altogether surprising given that there is no homogeneous 'theology of nature' within the original sources that have been classed as belonging within the Celtic tradition, especially when moving beyond explicitly ecclesiastical sources (Low, 1996, 5-9).

With regard to claims about the non-hierarchical nature of Celtic Christianity/spirituality, what emerges clearly across the *Life* is a picture of Columba's social status as a man of nobility who has access to and is 'at home' with others of high social standing. One of the most obvious of these contexts is presented in Book I, Chapter 49, which relates an encounter with Comgall, Abbot of Bangor, after both had been present at a conference of two kings at Druim Cett in north west Ireland (recounted in the *Annals of Ulster*). His encounters with the Pictish king, Bridei (II 33, 35, 42) and his receipt of angelic instruction to ordain Áedán as king of Dál Riata (III 5) provide further examples. Columba's position within these stories of encounter may have been ascribed to his status as a celebrated 'holy man' but his access to these possibilities and contexts in the first place (whether in narrative or in actuality) may have been primarily on account of his own noble status. This is not surprising, given that, as Gilbert Márkus (1997, 46) observed, there is "an obsession with status" in ancient native Irish laws, with the society divided into finely-differentiated classes of people, and also a struggle between the various churches (particularly Armagh and

Kildare) to establish primacy and the right to receive tribute from others. Moreover, Ian Bradley (1996, 43) has contended that Columba ran his monastic foundations as though they were a kingdom, with himself as the founding high king, and Máire Herbert (1988, 35) has suggested their governorship was based on “concepts of overlordship, kinship and inheritance”. In light of these considerations, the notion of a non-hierarchical Celtic Christianity is an obvious contemporary retrojection and hence it is not surprising to find no clear evidence for it in the *Life*.

Related to this, within works on Celtic Christianity, it is commonly held that church life was centred on local monasteries and was more strongly influenced by abbots than by bishops. Setting aside the questions that have been raised about this reading (see Patrick Wormald’s (1992, 16) tracing of it back to distortions by Bede), there is an assumption of what might be called localism here in a geographical sense and also in a familial sense in that individual monastic communities tended to be drawn from specific kin groups. This is not an explicit feature in the *Life*, although bishops do appear and the status of a bishop is explicitly oriented to in Book I, Chapter 44, where Columba is said to have acknowledged the higher status of a visiting bishop who had concealed his identity.

The woman-affirmative motif within contemporary Celtic spirituality is not in evidence in the *Life*, not unsurprisingly given the historical context. Women appear in various chapters not as central or even agentic characters but as wives, mothers or virgins (II 5, 37, 39, 40, 41; III 10), as individuals in need of help or healing (II 5, 25, 40, 41) or with whom sins are committed (I 22) or who are killed (II 25). The idea of Celtic spirituality as women-affirming is seen particularly in the later St Brigit tradition but it is absent from the *Life*.

One theme that is not foregrounded within contemporary conceptualizations of Celtic Christianity/spirituality and that is found in the *Life* and other Columban sources concerns the discernment of evil and demonic powers and an awareness of hell and judgement. This undermines the claim quoted earlier that ‘the Celts’ lacked the sense of sinfulness and divine wrath found in other religious traditions. Instances where devils appear in the *Life* range from the dramatic (as in Book III, Chapter 8, where Columba is said to have witnessed “a line of foul, black devils armed with iron spikes” ready to attack the monastery) to the mundane (as in Book II, Chapter 16, which tells of Columba blessing a milk-pail to drive out a devil that was hiding there), with references also being made to devils claiming or seeking to claim the

souls of people who had died (I 35, 39; III 13). The *Altus Prosator* demonstrates a clear sense of hell and a strong emphasis on the second coming, presented in apocalyptic terms, with Christ represented as coming to judge and carry the faithful off to glory (Clancy and Márkus, 1995). These features have led Ian Bradley (2011) to comment that “There’s more Calvin in Columba than Celtic”, yet this is ignored within popular versions of Celtic spirituality.

This dramatic emphasis on evil and devils in the *Life* could perhaps be regarded as an instance of human creativity and imagination that, as was noted earlier, constitute a characteristic theme within Celtic texts on Christianity from the early Middle Ages. Adomnán’s integration of existing sources into the *Life* could also be seen as an example of this, as could some of the responses that Columba is said to have produced to dilemmatic situations (for example, his ultimately fruitful suggestion that the couple in Book II, Chapter 41, join him in fasting and prayer in response to the wife’s refusal to lie with her husband).

Conclusion

The preceding analysis provides a sense of why many of the specific incidents of the *Life* might sound alien to contemporary ears, even if some features would be readily recognisable to some groups. For example, the emphases on devils, forces of evil and miraculous occurrences would not be unfamiliar to neo-pagans or perhaps more broadly to young people who have been exposed to the many artefacts in current popular culture which feature magic and malevolent forces and entities, such as the US *Twilight* books and films and the British television series *Being Human*.

Some of the *Life*’s less dramatic central concerns (of prayer, penance, pilgrimage and community) have formed the basis for recommendations for revitalizing contemporary church life, framed in terms of ‘Celtic models’ (Bradley, 2000). It could thus be said to have at least some capacity to reach beyond the local concerns that impelled its author and to speak in some transformative way to the human condition, even if this is at quite a basic level. For example, the *Life* could be said to have played a major role in maintaining the memory of Columba and ensuring his availability as a resource for performing diverse, socially useful functions. A specific instance of this lies in the way in which Columba, like St Patrick, could be said to act as a bridge between Catholic and Protestant communities in Northern Ireland

and Scotland, both of which can build cases for claiming him in a general sense, although this can lead to contestation too (Bradley, 1999, 230).

Questions about the relationship between the *Life* and Celtic Christianity and spirituality call for qualified responses, depending upon which version of Celtic Christianity and spirituality is being considered. As was noted, the *Life* manifests important features that characterize other religious texts produced by Celtic peoples in the early Middle Ages. Hence it is reasonable to agree with Oliver Davies (1999, 60) that it merits designation as a classic of Celtic spirituality/Christianity. However, it is much more difficult to accommodate the *Life* in a straightforward way within popular, contemporary versions of Celtic spirituality and Christianity with their range of liberal and nature-focused concerns, due partly to what Donald Meek (2000, 193) has termed the “sharp-edged saintliness of the saint, as portrayed by Adomnán” and his “flesh-subduing austerity”. Indeed the *Life* could be said to stand in critique of those versions, highlighting the elements that have been routinely glossed over or omitted altogether in the appropriation of saints from Celtic contexts. This is not to say that liberal and nature-focused concerns are not legitimate and socially valuable in themselves. Yet to accommodate Columba within the versions of Celtic spirituality and Christianity characterized by these concerns would require wholesale editing of the account offered by Adomnán, toning down, reinterpreting or excising motifs of penitence and penance, specific forms of engagement with the natural world, evil and demons and hierarchical structures to permit the appropriation of what would seem, in the context of the *Life*, a partial, dilute Columba.

Does this matter, though? A case could be made that all versions of Columba are crafted constructions and that it is acceptable to enlist a highly edited and minimally elaborated version of Columba in service of liberal, pastoral ends. He might then be positioned totemically alongside other Celtic saints as quasi-independent of a rigid, centralizing Church, as disavowing hierarchicalism, as acknowledging and celebrating the insights and contributions of women and as recognizing the sacredness of the natural world. These ascribed qualities could be legitimated as pastoral ends through association with Columba and other Celtic saints and could be used within spiritual direction informed by ‘Celtic spirituality’ to encourage individuals to remain true to themselves, their experiences and their insights concerning the transcendent on their spiritual journeys and to respect and work for the equality of people and care of the environment. The focus would be on the

furtherance of individually and socially valuable pastoral ends, the importance of which could be said to outweigh concerns about the selective appropriation of the Columba that is presented in the *Life*. In other words, the ends could be said to justify the means, even if the spiritual nature and ‘ultimate truth’ value of such ends might be queried by some.

Such an appropriation could be considered inauthentic when set alongside the version of Columba advanced in the *Life*. That version can be considered authentic in terms of the vision of Columba held and advanced by Adomnán and his sources but not necessarily in terms of the realities of Columba’s life, given that this vision was likely to have been crafted to serve particular familial-ecclesiastical-political ends (as noted earlier). The authenticity of key features of both academic and popular categories of ‘Celtic Christianity’ and ‘Celtic spirituality’ in terms of historical actualities has been contested. Although they overlap to some extent, it is fair to say that the academic categories have fared better than the popular categories when faced with the (progressively emerging and qualified picture of) historical evidence. This is not to say that popular representations of ‘Celtic Christianity’ and ‘Celtic spirituality’ have been weakened by academic critique in the eyes of their proponents. As Marion Bowman (2002, 90-94) has observed, academic and popular, devotional engagements with ‘Celtic spirituality’ are oriented to different ends and have different criteria for assessing worth and ‘authenticity’, with authenticity determined more subjectively within popular versions of ‘Celtic spirituality’ and in terms of value in facilitating a sense of transcendence. This disjuncture is not unique within theology and religious studies: Bowman notes a parallel between how academic Biblical scholars approach and engage with the Bible and how Christians engage with it as part of worship, prayer or devotional study.

So, in conclusion, we can say that whether or not a selective appropriation of the *Life of St Columba* as a text of Celtic Christianity and spirituality matters is dependent on the perspective of the person who is making the assessment. For academics who study ‘Celtic Christianity’ and ‘Celtic spirituality’ and are accountable to (legitimate interpretations of) historical evidence, such selective appropriation would be considered problematic and inauthentic. For individuals who find popular versions of ‘Celtic Christianity’ and ‘Celtic spirituality’ valuable for developing and/or maintaining their spiritual lives or the spiritual lives of others, enlisting Columba to inspire and motivate the enactment of qualities ascribed to ‘Celtic Christianity’ and ‘Celtic spirituality’ would be readily justifiable. Studying and

‘doing’ spirituality are different (but not mutually exclusive) domains of activity and care needs to be taken when moving between them.

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